

Video Killed the Radio Star by Ludovico_is_my_homeboy

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Angst and Feels, Angst with a Happy Ending, Attempted Masturbation, Billy Hargrove Has a Crush on Steve Harrington, Billy Hargrove Lives, Billy Hargrove Redemption, Billy Hargrove Tries to Be a Better Person, Billy Hargrove is a Mess, Bisexual Billy Hargrove, Bisexual Steve Harrington, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, Getting Together, Getting to Know Each Other, M/M, Masturbation, Mind Control Aftermath & Recovery, Mutual Masturbation, Mutual Pining, No healing cock but some healing talk, Not an endorsement of using porn as therapy, Not quite gay panic but definitely some panicking gays, Panic Attacks, Porn Watching, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Pre-Relationship, Pre-Slash, Protective Steve Harrington, Recreational Drug Use, Robin Buckley & Steve Harrington Friendship, Seriously the boys need regular therapy, Sexual Dysfunction, Soft Billy Hargrove, Steve Harrington is a Sweetheart, Steve works at the video store, Supportive Robin Buckley, Using Porn as therapy, Very Brief Suicide Ideation, Wingman Robin Buckley, it's only marijuana dad

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Robin Buckley, Steve Harrington

Relationships: Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington

Status: Completed

Published: 2021-02-11

Updated: 2021-04-01

Packaged: 2022-04-01 01:53:28

Rating: Not Rated

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 4

Words: 23,656

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

After the Battle of Starcourt, Billy is struggling to cope with his physical, mental, and emotional wounds. Depressed and desperate, he turns to some unconventional methods for healing and is forced to

procure some naughty materials to help.

Steve wants to know why no one ever told him that Family Home Video has a secret back room.

AKA: Billy's sadness is effecting his libido, Steve works in a video store that may or may not also stock porn, and the boys bond through cuddles and talk-therapy

1. You were the first one (you were the last one)

After the Battle of Starcourt, Billy Hargrove's recovery progresses slowly.

The guy who came in to clean up after all the excitement, Doctor Owens, made up some story. He did this without Billy's input or permission, didn't ask before deciding to play the fairy godmother in this little tragicomedy.

Billy isn't even convinced Owens is a real doctor, though he wears a white coat as he hovers at Billy's hospital bed like some kind of angel of death (if the angel of death had thinning hair and a limp and always carried a stress ball in his pocket) and apparently has the authority to shoo away everyone – doctors, nurses, curious bystanders – who might want to ask for Billy's version of events.

He gave Billy and all the other survivors of this far-reaching, secret war their roles to play in their little made-up tale.

They said it was a fire, or a gas explosion... it didn't really matter... only somewhere in there, apparently, Billy fell on some exposed metal pipes and got fucking impaled.

That's the story.

It was even in the papers. The Starcourt Disaster – totally boring, human, ordinary.

(And if the starfish design of Billy's wounds doesn't look anything like the injuries one would get from a metal pipe, what does it matter? What lunatic would ever guess the truth when the fiction is so disgustingly palatable? Owens squeezes his stress ball and gently nudges another nurse out the door.)

Billy's level of heroism – he was at the mall looking after Max, he saved a bunch of kids, he survived purely because of his human willpower and not at all because he was still partly an appendage of an eldritch nightmare monster from another dimension – changes with the telling. Bravery and culpability are traits assigned at random

and none of it is particularly fair. Even the Mayor can't escape censure.

Myth is interwoven with fact until the two are impossible to parse. Before long there are at least five different stories circulating and none of them are right.

That's deliberate, according to some balding conspiracy theorist who came to visit Billy in the hospital when it was all over. He'd been there to visit someone else, another survivor of Starcourt (he'd probably come to see someone who was a hero, a good guy... not like Billy, who was just a monster's chew-toy, a pathetic footnote) and looked irritated and defeated but also itchy with something important bursting to be said. He seemed eager for someone to talk to, and he made some good points.

Billy, desperate for any kind of lifeline to cling to, hadn't kicked the older man out when he planted himself in his hospital room.

According to Murray Bauman (he gave Billy his card, unprompted), the disinformation campaign was part of a deliberate strategy used by Owens and the shady government department he represents.

If there's not just one story to prove, then there's not just one story to refute. And the story itself must be diluted like cheap booze, made more manageable and acceptable.

The truth becomes a nebulous thing, more rumour than reality.

Billy isn't even the most important part of the story, to be honest, and he should be grateful for that... except that the most important part is that people are dead.

The Sheriff is dead. All those people the Mind Flayer liquified...

(All those people Billy helped murder...)

Billy finds, after ruminating on Bauman's theories and the dark, terrible things he remembers from his time as the Mind Flayer's puppet, that he doesn't care.

He lays there trapped in his hospital bed, staring at the ceiling, and

he doesn't care.

He doesn't care about the story, or about whether he's considered a hero or a villain or a victim.

He doesn't care.

He doesn't care about a goddamn thing.

Why should he?

After all, Max is fine, and that weird (special, important, dangerous) girl, Eleven, is fine... everyone is fine.

Billy is fine.

No, no he's not...

He's in a catastrophic amount of pain from the moment he comes to in the ambulance, and then even when they get him to the hospital he can't quite vocalize his agony because of the nature of his injuries, so he lays there on the gurney and spasms uncontrollably, his face a rictus mask as he swallows silent screams.

And they tell him it will be fine. The nurses and doctor yell and whisper and they look him in the eye and lie to him and tell him it will all be fine.

They tell him *he* will be fine.

He passes out, wakes up, screams wordlessly, passes out again.

When he comes back to consciousness in the hospital, finally, days later, the pain has slipped into something more familiar. It is a deep ache that he welcomes because it is nothing like the feeling of being unmade by the Mind Flayer, which was like having a terrible acid slowly eating away at your insides.

This kind of pain is nothing new. It's just physical. It is flesh and muscle, skin and bone, nerve endings firing off warning signals in the usual way.

(No. He can't say it, can't admit it to himself, but the truth is it's not just physical. Something intangible has settled in like rot in his insides. There is something deep down, a black hole, a familiar, dangerous thing opening wide and threatening to swallow him whole. A deep, black pit of nothing, nothing, *nothing*...)

Billy knows this kind of pain well.

He can live with it. This is *fine*.

Even the sight of Neil and Susan standing by his bedside, both looking for all the world like they'd both just swallowed the bitterest of lemons, can't crack through the veneer of Billy-Being-Fine.

Just fine.

Slowly, slowly, things come back, until Billy is almost normal again.

Normal. Again. Almost.

He can sit up, and then he can stand, and then he can take a few halting steps across the room, and then he can shower without help. He takes heavy pain meds and does more physical therapy than medically recommended out of sheer stubbornness and tries his best to build his walls back up and soldier on alone.

Not that there are too many people hanging around to help him. His fifteen minutes of heroism don't cancel out a world of indifference, and despite everything he is still something of an outsider in Hawkins. He's not a long-standing member of this close-knit community. He's not a novelty or a desirable object of lust anymore, so drumming up interest in his pain is a losing battle.

And besides, it's not like he deserves care and affection right now.

Everyone's got worthier causes to pour their time and energy into. Nobody cares about a... whatever he is. A villain? Certainly not a victim. Just a tool, really... a limb that's been amputated.

Nobody cares about the useless, empty shell of a person that remains.

Well...

No, that's not exactly true.

Max helps.

If Billy was still capable of being surprised by things, if he still had the energy to care, he supposes he'd be surprised by this.

They've never been close and tied up with that is the fact that Billy is so very *aware* of Max now. Aware of how he'd struck her, thrown her into a wall, screamed at her, called her a bitch, tried to murder her and her friends.

And, yeah, he was possessed when he did that. But here's the thing – would the Mind Flayer have chosen him if he wasn't already ugly and cruel and rotten, deep down?

What if there are no accidents, no coincidences, and he was always actually supposed to be the enemy in someone else's story? What if he was always the monster? The sacrifice?

What if every awful thing that happened to him was richly deserved?

That's the thought that haunts him now.

He's very aware that he almost lost her. Almost lost Max.

Max seems to feel the same, because instead of being scared of him like she maybe should be, when he's released from the hospital the little idiot follows him around the house, helps him to the bathroom, waits outside in case he falls in the shower (which only happened the once, but what an awkward, traumatic moment that was for the pair of them), and makes him food when he's hungry and too sore and stiff to get to the kitchen himself.

(He wants to cry. He looks at her face all twisted in determination and uncertainty, and he sees a mirror reflection of himself, and he wants to cry. He wants to, but he's too tired. He can't cry. Hasn't cried. Too tired. Too empty.)

They go on like they've always done, in a way... operating in a separate world from their parents, taking care of themselves, orbiting each other, together yet apart.

And now they also have a shared knowledge of that other world, and even though they don't talk about it much, their shared history moves between them like a tangible thing.

Max tells Billy about things he'd missed before. About monster-dogs with mouths that open like flowers, about secret underground tunnels full of poisonous vines, about Billy interrupting a quest without meaning to, without understanding. About things he was only on the periphery of, a whole story in which he was only a clueless supporting character – and he can't help feeling like he's hearing it all too late.

Maybe it wouldn't have made any difference if he had known but still...

He pops another pain pill, chalky and white, a gift from Owens. Something to keep him quiet and complacent.

Too little. Too late.

(He thinks he should maybe be mad about this... be furious with someone. Hate someone for not stopping the Mind Flayer sooner, for not keeping all that agony from happening, for not saving him from all this pain. *Help me, save me, please, please, please.* He wants to be angry, but he isn't. He isn't angry or anything else. He's too tired. It is too late.)

July passes and August drifts by, and Billy is almost passing for normal again (*normal. again. almost.*) except for a hitch in his step and some persistent breathing problems and a collection of thick, angry-looking, healing wounds turning slowly into permanent scars on his torso, and the nightmares.

He's almost happy about the nightmares. They are the only times when he feels something like a real emotion.

(It doesn't matter they keep him from sleep. Sleep is meaningless

now. He can't be any more tired than he already is.)

He's grateful to feel something, even if the something he is feeling is horror.

He doesn't realize the problem right away, on the first night it happens. He's still in an exhaustion-induced limbo state in his head so he's not as quick-witted as he usually is.

It's been well over a month and a half. He's recovered enough that he can pretty much be on his own.

He's recovered enough that he no longer has blessing of drugged unconsciousness. He's recovered enough to be on new meds, again courtesy of Owens. He's recovered enough to have trouble sleeping all the way through the night, waking up terrified and crying more often than not.

He dreams of deadly steep stairs and the darkness of a warehouse basement. He dreams of rotten smells and soul-tearing violations and wide, innocent eyes begging him for help he can't give.

He stares up at the ceiling, wide awake. The clock on his nightstand says 2:13, but the number means nothing to Billy – he feels timeless, anchorless.

He feels empty and tired. He wants to sleep but can't.

It is mostly out of force of habit, the familiarity of things done in darkness, that his hand drifts down and slips under the elastic of his boxers.

Fingers brush past wiry hair to grasp his cock. He distractedly teases the head and then strokes himself. He's barely even aware he's doing it... it's such a careless, familiar thing. And, distantly, he thinks it might help him sleep.

Nothing happens.

He doesn't get hard. Not at all. Minutes drift past in a haze before Billy realizes that he's feeling nothing of note down there.

Not quite panicking, he tries more pointed movements. He reaches over in the dark and snags some lotion, squirts some in his hand and then reaches down again. His free hand finds his balls and caresses them. He tries all his classic moves: the tug, the twist, the stroke.

His cock remains stubbornly limp.

He gives up eventually. He chalks the whole thing up to just being tired.

Of course, the next time it happens it's harder to pretend like he's fine.

It's late afternoon. He's alone in the house. He should be having a nap, resting and recuperating.

The thought occurs to him that this is the longest he's been without getting off since he hit puberty.

He flicks through his stash of porno mags, the ones he leaves out as a bluff and the ones he hides where his dad won't find them. He stands up and sits down. He stretches out on his bed and undoes the knotted strings of his sweatpants.

His hands find their place.

He closes his eyes.

His hands grip cold metal bars. He needs to hold on. Something is gripping his lower half like a vice but if he holds on to the bars he won't get dragged down into that dark, dank, rotten-smelling basement where the THING is...

Where the monster waits...

He grips his cock and his movements are not at all what they should be. He's holding too tight, bordering on painful, and tugging at his limp cock roughly, desperately, as his breathing tips into something dangerously close to hyperventilation.

His hands...

His hands are clammy, slippery with (cum) (slime) (blood) sweat, and he can't hold on to the metal railing.

The tentacles tug. He loses his grip.

He is pulled down steep metal stairs.

He is so cold. So cold.

So cold...

Heather screamed and cried and begged. She just wanted to help him. She screamed and cried and begged.

Billy screams and cries and begs... nobody hears him.

He opens his eyes with a gasp and sits straight up in bed, the over-quick movement sending sharp waves of agony through him as he tugs at the still-healing holes in his chest.

It is in that moment, his chest heaving with fear, all pretense of pleasure evaporating, Heather's screams ringing in his ears, that Billy realizes he might be in trouble.

Notes for the Chapter:

Be safe and healthy, lovely readers! <3

2. Pictures came and broke your heart

It's been a while since the last time Billy felt this small.

Is that true? Well, let's see.

He felt small when he was young, when he was trying to protect his mom from Neil's abuse. Like the dictionary definition of weakness.

He felt small when she left. Small and confused.

He felt small when he was bullied, and then less small when he was the bully – although looking back, he isn't sure that beating others up ever really helped that ache inside of him. All it proved is that 'small' and 'big' are relative, and that being big on the outside isn't the same thing as feeling big on the inside.

(The last person he hurt that way - intentionally, with his fists and his rage - was Steve Harrington. Steve, who drove his car smack into Billy's and saved him from becoming even more of a mindless killer. Steve, who probably saved Billy's life, too, with that dumbass move. Actual-Hero Harrington, who got none of the credit after Starcourt even though Billy got all his sins whitewashed clean. Ain't that a kick in the ass?)

He'd thought he'd successfully tabled memories of his brutal past, put them on a shelf where they belonged, but they are here and they remain, a lingering gift from that monster, the Mind Flayer.

All his sins, remembered.

(A good name for it... the 'Mind Flayer'. After, when Max told him what they'd been calling it, his first thought had been: *yeah, that's right. That's what it was.*)

When he was possessed these intrusive thoughts, playing on a loop, were a nice little 'fuck you' for Billy to watch over and over and over like so many VHS tapes as he screamed silently, trapped in his own mind. Helpless.

Small.

And now that he's 'free' they haven't gone away - they pop up and won't leave. So maybe it never stopped. Maybe he's still trapped, still screaming.

Maybe he never actually got away.

He felt small when he was dragged down into the basement, when he was lying on the ground underneath that thing as it clamped its ugly tentacle over his mouth.

He felt small facing the Mind Flayer down at Starcourt Mall, standing between it and the girls.

So, no... guess it hasn't been too long since the last time Billy felt this small. Not really.

It's still pretty awful, though. More, perhaps, than it should be, given his past experiences.

He is bundled up in thick sweatshirt, even though it's still summer and it isn't at all cold out. He is perpetually chilled these days, and also he wants barriers in place between his scars and the outside world. Another one of the world's great ironic twists - Billy Hargrove putting more clothes *on*.

He is wearing sunglasses. A lot of the time the world is too bright for him now. Unfortunately, it makes him look a little shady, and he finds himself fiddling with them, debating whether to leave them on or take them off and just suffer through the headache that would result. He takes them off, finally, after some thought.

(He doesn't want to be seen. He doesn't want to be heard. He doesn't want to be touched. No, that's not true... he wants all of those things. He does and he doesn't. What he doesn't want is for everybody to confirm that he is no longer the person he was.)

He's delaying the inevitable, now.

Normally he would have just asked Max for help. She gets everything else for him. He's willing to let her run all his errands if it means he doesn't have to leave the house.

(He used to be desperate to leave, to get away, to be free. He still wants that, but now whenever he takes a step towards the front door he goes panicky and cold and his muscles forget how to work. It's fine. Totally fine. Max can get him what he needs.)

She can't get him this, though.

He reminds himself, for what it's worth, that he has no reason to be shy around people. He's a hero according to the papers. They all think he's some kind of good guy.

And even if they don't think he's a good guy... they don't know what he really is.

They can't know.

Surely, they can't know. Nobody can look into his heart and see the truth.

He feels dirty, ugly, fracturing inside and out, but it's not something anyone else can see.

Right?

The store is in a familiar kind of strip mall, and as he climbs out of his car – he's had to shell out most of his savings to get the Camaro back in working order, although, like Billy himself, it still bears gruesome marks from the Battle of Starcourt – Billy is reminded almost viscerally of the days when he would drop Max off at the arcade.

He doesn't do that for her anymore. She gets a ride from her friends. Just another way he's dropping the ball.

Almost back to normal.

Hilarious.

He shuffles in the front door slowly, refusing to take up any more space than he absolutely needs to. The store looks blessedly empty, although his attempt at a covert entrance is interrupted immediately by the cheerful ringing of a bell and a bright, too-familiar voice calling out to him.

“Welcome to Family Home Video!”

Oh no.

Oh, fuck...

“How can I help... oh! Hi. Um...”

It is, without a doubt, the last person on earth Billy want to see here, now. Especially now.

“Harrington,” he mumbles, and sure enough there he is.

Steve Harrington is *here*. He is *here* in this store that used to be a safe-ish space for Billy... and damn him, he’s as bright and beautiful as he ever was. There is still something that might be the tail-end of a fading bruise under one eye, but the summer sun has left honey highlights in his hair and majority of his skin is smooth and lovely and magically unscarred as always.

(He has often been the unwitting star in a not insignificant number of Billy's private fantasies, and this... this isn't helping.)

He is also wearing a uniform vest with a nametag on it, which means that further conversation is basically inevitable at this point.

“Bi – Hargrove. Hi,” a blush creeps up Steve’s cheeks. “It’s... it’s really good... hi. Um, how are you?”

Billy blinks dumbly back at Steve and the blush on the other boy's cheeks deepens.

"Sorry, that's...", Steve shakes his head. "Sorry... a real stupid question. But, uh... seriously, how are you?"

Huh.

Right into the deep end, then.

It's not like Billy hasn't heard this question before. He has. A lot. However, the thing that really kills here is that Steve isn't saying it with the disinterested casualness that seems to define most of Billy's interactions these days... as if he is invisible and the other person is already looking beyond him, moving on from their conversation.

On the contrary, Steve seems genuinely concerned. Interested. Like he wants to know, like it effects him somehow, like he wants Billy to answer honestly and that's...

That's impossible.

"I'm fine," Billy chokes out, and he doesn't know whether to laugh or cry at the sheer ridiculousness of that statement.

Billy knows that he must look like death warmed up – pale and gray and exhausted and greasy-haired.

Nothing like what he was. It is the contrast that kills... the old Billy is dead and buried somewhere in the graveyard of his marked and scarred body, just a ghost, a memory, now.

But he is sure that Steve is making the comparison in his mind in this moment, weighing this new version against the old and finding him wanting, and that hurts. It's stupid, but it hurts a lot.

I am not who I am, he thinks wryly, and then flinches inwardly at mentally quoting a villain.

"Right," Steve says after a moment's hesitation, unconvinced but accepting the assertion gamely anyway. "I mean... I'm glad. I've been meaning to check in on you and... it's been... I'm really glad you're okay."

The words don't gel, don't make sense in Billy's head, and it takes him a moment to process what they mean and the genuine emotion that seems to be behind them.

"Why?"

The word is out before Billy can stop it, and once it's out it hangs, heavy and impossible, between them.

Steve seems startled, almost shocked by the borderline combative nature of the question. His eyes go wide and he rocks back slightly on his heels, confused.

After a brief pause, however, his brow furrows and his shoulders go up. His gaze goes determined and thoughtful as he studies Billy.

As he *sees* him.

Billy knows that stance, that determined look. He's been on the receiving end of it before.

He feels something stir in him... barely there, just a twitch, a niggerle.

Something like wariness but also curiosity. Then again, that was always the feeling he got with Harrington. He was always just curious, waiting, wondering what the other boy was going to do.

Even when they fought, even when Billy pushed and pushed and pushed, he was just poking the bear, trying to figure out who King Steve really is.

The next words out of Steve's mouth don't clear things up in that regard.

"I never wanted you to be hurt, Billy," Steve says, voice soft and maybe a little defensive. "What happened to you... I'm really sorry it happened. I can't imagine what that would be like, but I know Will... Will Byers, he went through something kind of like what you did. He's better now but he was... for a long time. And anyway, it's just... awful. What happened. The worst thing, really. You didn't deserve that. Nobody deserves that."

Billy feels his stomach swoop dangerously, sees the dots on the edges of his vision swirl. In his mind's eye he sees walls collapsing, crashing down, burying him underneath the rubble.

You didn't deserve that.

No.

That's not...

That's *not*...

He can't. No, that's not...

I can't! I won't do it!

Please don't...!

Billy can feel his insides breaking, can feel the shaky structures holding him up caving in, and he decides right then and there that this can't happen. Not here, not now. Not ever, if he can help it.

This wasn't supposed to happen.

He just needs what he came here for. He didn't come in for a lecture or pop psychology or Steve fucking Harrington. He doesn't want understanding or acceptance or fucking *forgiveness* and he absolutely doesn't want to even think about what Steve just said.

He just needs to get what he came for. Get it, get back to the car, go home.

Go back to your tiny little room so you can crumble to bits alone and in peace.

I can't crumble. I can't sleep.

I can't feel anything, and when I do feel... it's like dying.

Like dying again.

"I'm..." Billy hesitates for a moment, but only a moment.

He is, frankly, too tired and desperate to be embarrassed, is too traumatized to be shocked, and has come too far to flake out now. He made it all the way out of his room and out of his house and down the road to this stupid video store with its bright lights and its chattering people.

He can't go back now.

He needs to get what he came for.

"I need something from the back room," he says, forcing his voice to stay steady and burying deep down inside of himself the words he should instead speak. The truths he needs to let out.

His request is enough, however, to turn the conversation on its head.

Harrington's 'salesman' façade fades almost instantly into a look of confusion. He blinks twice and then shuffles slightly, folding his arms.

"Uh... back room?"

"Frank, the owner," Billy explains through gritted teeth. "He lets me rent stuff from the back room. Is he here?"

"Ah, no, it's just me today, and Keith is on break. We... we have a back room?" Steve looks genuinely perplexed. Frankly, his unfeigned confusion and Billy's new physical limitations (and emotional exhaustion) are the only things keeping Billy from throttling him right now.

Still, Billy raises an eyebrow and Steve shuffles sheepishly, dropping his gaze.

"Sorry," the brunette runs his fingers through his long locks. "I just started working here, like, a week ago. What's, ah... in the back room?"

Billy waits. He waits for the old familiar rage to flare up, the need to lash out at the world and at Steve Harrington in particular. Because Steve Harrington... he's so goddamn stupid, so stupid, and he always has been, and really that's the thing that drives Billy up the wall.

His beautiful house and his fancy car and his perfect hair and his girly lips and his honest sweetness and his fucking stupidity... walking around oblivious to the world's horrors, never having to hide crucial pieces of himself away like Billy does... never needing to plant his feet.

You planted your feet. It wasn't enough. You were still pulled down into the darkness.

Never planting his feet, and then being shocked, absolutely stunned, when someone bowls him over. Like he couldn't possibly understand how the world could be so cruel, while cruelty is a cold, hard fact of Billy's life.

'Nobody deserves that'... Jesus fucking Christ. Who are you trying to kid?

(I deserved it. I'm wrong, wrong, wrong... broken, and now it shows in my scars. I can't heal. I can't cry. I can't sleep. I (didn't) deserve it.)

And of course, even that assessment is wrong, wrong... because Steve knew, didn't he? Because it turns out wasn't the stupid one of the two of them.

It was Billy, not Steve, who was the child, the idiot, the one who didn't know about the monsters. And all the while Steve was staring in the face of evil and *winning*. He was figuring it out and fighting and surviving in this new world.

All this time Steve Harrington was the hero, and Billy Hargrove was the villain, the victim, the nothing.

Billy waits for the anger, but it doesn't come. There is a superficial feeling of frustration, but it doesn't go any deeper. There is just something cold and heavy and resigned now. That's the only thing left behind.

Like his libido, the fury Billy could always count on to carry him through is gone. Wiped away by pain or depression or exhaustion.

If he could still feel things, he might feel something like despair at how numb he is... so numb that even Steve fucking Harrington's stupid fucking face and stupid fucking "you didn't deserve that" can't get a rise out of him.

He's in so much trouble.

Enough. Billy holds out his hand.

“Keys,” he says.

Steve blinks at him.

“Huh?”

Billy motions to Steve’s ring of store keys, dangling out of his front pocket.

“Keys,” he repeats, working hard to inject a little more authority into his tone.

Swallowing, Steve removes the keys and places them in Billy’s hand. Billy then hobbles (and there’s no other word for it, he hobbles, because even though he tries very hard to stay steady he can’t hide his fundamental physical brokenness... another thing for Steve to gawp at) towards the back of the store.

Steve turns around to check that they are alone in the store before following a few steps behind. Billy can feel his gaze on the back of his neck. He picks up the pace and they quickly come to a door that looks like it leads to a storage closet and is partially hidden behind a disused display case.

Remembering the times before with Frank, Billy selects a key with a purple fob attached to it and uses it to unlock the door. He reaches over to switch on the lights and walks in, Steve still trailing him.

It’s not much. It’s basically a small room with a bookcase in it, only the bookcase is full of VHS tapes Steve’s never seen before.

Billy doesn’t bother looking back at Steve, even though he is very conscious that the other boy is gaping at him like a guppy. He heads straight for the tapes and searches for the ones he wants.

Well... they don’t actually have the ones he really wants. If he wants to get his engine revving again there are films he’d prefer to watch, but they aren’t as widely circulated and even if they were they probably still wouldn’t have them in a town like Hawkins. Even in California you had to be careful.

The tapes themselves are battered and used, in blank covers with just

the titles written on them, sometimes very clearly in magic marker. There are one or two more professional looking ones, but for the most part they look like contraband. Billy knows you need a special license to sell these kind of things, so he suspects most of the tapes probably are.

He picks out his old standards, his compromise films. He picks one with a threesome – two guys and a girl, and the guys make out a little in the beginning – and one that's a gang bang, so mostly men.

Another one he picks at random, hurrying because he's conscious of Steve reading the titles over his shoulder and making increasingly incredulous 'meep' noises. It's awkward and humiliating, and even in the haze of his numbness something like shame is creeping in. At this moment he'd even take Frank's crude jokes and unwelcome leer over being in this room with a stunned and blushing Harrington.

Steve Harrington, the boy he doesn't understand, the boy he loves to hate... the boy he desperately wants to like him. The boy he wants to impress.

He knows he's not being particularly impressive right now. The fact that he's renting pornos is really just the tip of the iceberg.

"Has this *always* been back here?" Steve ask, voice high and taut with bemused pseudo-outrage. "I didn't know about this! *Who else knows about this?!*"

Everyone, Billy thinks, small threads of amusement weaving their way inside (and that in and of itself is a small miracle). *Worst kept secret in town. Everyone knew but you, pretty boy. Popped your cherry with me, I guess, after all.*

It's stupid. This is crazy. It's all so ridiculous, but still Billy endures.

He's desperate. It's been so long and the initial worry he felt during his first failed 'sessions' has slipped into full-blown fear now, born of the growing conviction that he might never function that way again. That his physical pain and scars may now manifest in a whole new way, as permanent impotence. That the black hole inside draining him of his emotion and energy may one day wipe him out

completely.

Skin mags, long showers, experimental play with things that should probably not have been used as sex toys (let's not go there again). Nothing else has worked.

He needs these tapes. They're the only thing he hasn't tried yet besides actual human touch (and he can't do that, can't let anybody see what he looks like now)...

He wants *this* back. He wants to feel good, to have something that belongs to him and that isn't just more pain. He wants very much to close his eyes and let the wave carry him away.

He wants to touch his own body and not hate it, not feel cut off from it, not feel like it's a dirty, weak, strange thing belonging to some evil, repellent monster.

He wants to cum and he wants to cry and he wants to sleep. He wants to feel something again.

He wants to be himself again.

He turns on his heel and brushes past Steve on his way out into the main store... only he doesn't quite manage to do that without stumbling. Steve's hand shoots out and lands on his arm, steadying him.

The gentle touch sends electric currents of relief and pleasure and tension through Billy. It's been so fucking long since he was touched that way. Steve removes his hand before Billy can shake it off.

When they get back to brightly-lit store and the front counter, however, they face another problem.

Steve, who has only just managed to get a grip on how the register works during his brief tenure here, doesn't know if the rental prices for porn films from the secret back room he's only just finding out about are different from normal movies. He also doesn't know if the return dates are different.

He goes and stands behind the counter. He takes the videotapes from

Billy and then stares at them. He puts them on the counter, then picks them up, then looks at Billy, then puts them down again.

Now it's the brunette's turn to feel his face heat and shame creep in, this time because his own ignorance is making the whole exchange that much worse. But he's had quite a shock, in his defense, and he's completely out of his depth here.

Steve doesn't want to check the films out the usual way, with a scanner and careful records, so he takes out a sheet of notepaper from one of Keith's notebooks and writes down the titles:

- Hot and Horny Firemen 4
- Lovely Lola's Threesome Adventure
- Naughty Babysitters Caught in the Act 2

Once finished, he stares blankly at the titles, written out in paper and ink in the vague hope that when Keith or Robin or someone much more astute than he comes in to start their shift he'll be able to show them this and explain about the secret back room full of porn and ask what the hell he's supposed to do about it.

He looks at the titles, and then up at Billy, who has a curiously blank expression on his face. So blank, in fact, that it can only be a mask, a wretched, plastered-on mask.

It suddenly seems horrifically wrong to Steve to have the names of the films there, on this paper, as evidence. As proof of Billy's secret wants and needs - needs that are not unique to him but which are kind of sacred nonetheless (Lovely Lola and her firemen friends notwithstanding). It seems like a cruel act of exposure, yet another casual humiliation inflicted on a guy who doesn't deserve to be humiliated further.

A guy who has already been hurt in ways Steve can't even imagine.

Steve doesn't know when exactly this happened... when he stopped hating Billy and seeing him as a dangerous enemy and instead started seeing him as... well, as something else.

Maybe it was just now. Maybe it happened because of the breathless way Billy said ‘Harrington’ when he first came in, or because of the stunned, grief-stricken, broken look that crossed his face when Steve told him he didn’t want him to be hurt.

Maybe it was when he asked, in that weirdly lost way, ‘why?’.

Or maybe it was before, when El told them all about the mind control, and the torture and pain, and left Steve feeling sick and terrible and strangely guilty for what had happened to this guy who was... well, still a jerk, but an innocent jerk. In no way deserving of this level of grief.

Truthfully, Steve never really saw the other boy as an enemy. Not really, not even when he and Billy fought (well, when Billy beat him up, let’s be honest). He was an obstacle, and he was scary, but Steve knows very well that there are bigger, more evil things out there in the world.

Steve feels a sudden, overwhelming wave of protectiveness for Billy... for the boy who seems strangely vulnerable and much too resigned.

No one is more surprised than Steve by this development.

Aware that Billy is watching him with that same horribly blank, not-quite-sad look, Steve tears up the paper and tosses the pieces in the bin under the counter. Then he looks up again and shifts uneasily under that watchful gaze.

He doesn’t care if he gets fired. He’ll never tell anyone about this, ever.

“I, uh... I don’t know how much...”

Billy wordlessly slides a crumpled ten-dollar bill across the counter before shoving his hands back into the pockets of his sweatshirt.

“Oh, right.” Steve picks up the note. “Um, I don’t know what the return times are on those, either.”

“Frank used to give me two weeks with them.”

Steve's face scrunches up slightly in confusion. The maximum check-out for a film is usually a week.

Billy shrugs and Steve can't help but see defeat written in the gesture.

"There's only one VCR in my house. I need to make sure everyone is gone for the day or I can't watch 'em. I need... I need the time."

"Right." Steve hesitates, then slides the tapes across the counter towards Billy. "See you in two weeks, then."

"It's a date, pretty boy," Billy huffs drily, and for a moment, just a moment, the old, slyly confident Billy Hargrove breaks through. A small grin twitches at the corner of his mouth and his eyes sparkle with dark humour.

Steve is so pleased to see that familiar look that he doesn't even mind the dumb nickname that comes with it. He smiles back, wide and happy.

Then, just like that, the old Billy is gone again, and the hollowed-out shell that remains gathers up his tapes and silent walks out the door.

"Robin?"

"Hmm?"

"What do you think about Billy Hargrove?"

"Well, I like him a lot better now that he's not possessed and trying to kill us. He's not trying to kill us again, is he?"

"No, no...he isn't. He's fine, I guess. Well, not fine, obviously. I just..."

Silence falls, but Robin doesn't interject. Steve is a moron sometimes for sure, but if you give him time and space he's actually pretty on point once in a while. Besides, he's the one who started this

conversation, wasting time as he avoids completing a stock check.

When it comes to Steve and his mental gymnastics, Robin just works here.

"He did try to kill me, once," Steve says after a moment, thoughtful.

"Yeah, I know. I was there, remember?"

"No, I mean... I mean before. He was looking for Max and got upset when I tried to keep her from him – to be fair, we were dealing with more weird shit and I thought it would be better that way – and then he went after Lucas and it was this whole... whole thing..."

"And, what? He tried to kill you? How?"

"I don't... I don't think he meant to, really. I think he was... you know, I don't even think he was seeing me anymore, after a while. He beat the shit out of me but it was also like he wasn't even aware. He was just wailing on me, punching me, even after I stopped fighting back. To be honest I blacked out for the end but Dustin said later it was like he was... just crazy. So crazy. Crying, I think. Max had to drug him to make him stop."

"Jeesh. Wait, drugs?"

"A needle. We had a sedative for Will, back when he was going through his...thing."

"Uh... sure."

"Yeah."

"Uhhh... well. I didn't know about all that, but... I guess he's fine. He never bothered me before. He was in my advanced Lit class and he didn't talk much but when he was called he always knew the answers. I guess I can see where he'd have anger issues, kind of? He'd, like, poke people sometimes and needle them. Nothing too awful, though... it wasn't as bad as it could have been."

"Not as bad as being in class with me, then?" Steve asks wryly.

"Your predictable breakfast choices were your only crime, Harrington," Robin smirks. "And your total obliviousness."

"Sure."

"Anyway... I know he was dating Sherrie Paterson for like, two seconds, and they aren't together anymore but she seemed okay with him. He isn't like one of those super-douche guys who secretly hates women, which is a plus. He actually defended her when Tommy was being an ass."

"Right."

"I heard from Marcie in band practice that Sherrie's friend Becky thought he might be gay, actually."

"What? Wait, *what?*"

"Well, Becky's friend Tina caught him making out with a guy at a party, allegedly, but she was drunk and so were they, so who knows? And it's not a scientific fact so don't quote me on this but according to Becky nobody is that hot and hyper-macho and aggressive about it without being secretly gay."

"Excuse you, I'm that hot and macho. I'm, like, super macho."

"How long did you spend on your hair this morning, Steve?"

"That's not... that's not the point."

"You waxed rhapsodic about Rutger Hauer for twenty minutes yesterday. It was getting super awkward towards the end there."

"You made me watch *Blade Runner*! You forced me into it - I wanted to watch *Caddyshack* and instead you made me watch *Blade Runner*! He's really cool in it... that's all!"

"I suppose you did beat up that Russian," Robin muses, enjoying Steve's sputtering.

"Damn right I did! I'm not... I mean... I don't think I am...?"

"And if you were, it wouldn't make any difference to me, Steve. You know that. And you know how I feel about stupid stereotypes. Maybe the point is that you don't need to attach labels to everything to understand it. Maybe you can just like what you like and it doesn't have to change who you are."

There is a long pause as Steve sucks in a deep breath, calming himself down and reorienting himself in more ways than one. It's not the first time this suggestion has crossed his mind, but now, with Robin levelling one of her patented unimpressed glares at him, those vague suppositions are suddenly taking on new definition.

"Yeah," he says finally. "I'm... yeah."

"Anyway, not the point. Point is, I don't know what Billy Hargrove is. Gay, straight, bisexual - no idea. Does it matter?"

"No. No. He was in here the other day and I just... no, I guess it doesn't matter all that much."

"Okay. Do you think he's going to try to kill us again?"

"No," Steve answers, quickly and firmly.

Robin raises an incredulous eyebrow and Steve's gaze darts away, flush creeping up his cheeks. He runs his hand through his hair distractedly.

"It's not... he's different. I guess. Than he was. Even... even with how he was before the Mind Flayer. He's different now. I don't think he's going to... I don't think he wants to hurt people. And there's something... sad about him now, and it..."

Steve's face twists into something weirdly miserable. Robin pauses, watching him, and then shrugs slightly.

"Makes sense. That was no picnic, what happened. If he's got friends and support, though, he should make a full recovery. Or so I hear."

"Sure," Steve says quietly, deciding not to enlighten Robin regarding what little he knows about the limited support Billy Hargrove might or might not have at his disposal.

Satisfied, Robin nods and goes back to shelving rom-coms while Steve contemplates ways to bring up the secret porn room existing in their place of work without admitting that he's already been back there. Then another thought occurs to him, and he grimaces.

"Robin?"

"What?"

"I don't... I don't do that to you, do I? Make you feel... like I'm labelling you, or whatever? With stereotypes? I wasn't trying to be... I don't make you feel that way, do I?"

Robin slides a copy of *Grease* into its place on the shelf before turning and looking Steve dead in the eye.

"No, Steve. You don't. You scared the shit of me for all of five seconds when I first told you - and that's saying something given that we'd just nearly been killed escaping Russian spies. But then you were... you were great. You didn't make me feel that way... so don't make *yourself* feel that way either, okay?"

"Yeah," Steve nods thoughtfully.

After a moment's contemplation he looks up, grins at Robin, and then shuffles back to his place behind the register.

Yeah.

Somewhat enlightened by his conversation with Robin - though not nearly enough to touch upon a number of thorny issues he is deliberately avoiding thinking about - Steve tries to put Billy Hargrove out of his mind as much as possible.

It's easy enough to do, although when he sees the kids again he does make a point of asking Max how Billy is doing.

She gives him a look that is a little incredulous and very tired, as well

as the requisite non-answer answer. Then she asks if he'd mind buying cigarettes for her for Billy, and he buys a whole carton without protest and uses his own money to do so.

He tries not to think too hard about why.

His personal penchant for denial notwithstanding, soon enough two weeks are up, and the beat-up Camaro pulls up in front of Family Home Video again.

Steve can see Billy flinch when he sees who's behind the register - Steve is now trusted to work completely on his own on slow days, although the back room has not yet been mentioned by any of his coworkers - and to be honest Steve himself feels utterly unprepared for what promises to be an extraordinarily awkward interaction.

He eyes up Mrs. Mankey as he hands her her stack of action movies and wishes her a good rest of her day, glad that she's on her way out. Hopefully the store will stay quiet enough for the two boys to avoid any further embarrassment.

At least the blonde, apparently deciding that ripping the band-aid off is the best strategy, doesn't hesitate overlong before stepping up to the front desk.

"I..." Billy starts, swallowing heavily as he places the tapes on the counter. "I need another two weeks."

That was not what Steve was expecting. He looks down at the videos, looks back up at Billy, and puts the set of work keys he'd been fingering nervously back into his pocket.

"Uh... another two weeks?"

Billy just glares at the tapes like they have personally offended him and says nothing.

"That good, huh?" Steve tries to joke just to break the silent tension.

"I don't know," Billy huffs, frustrated. "I haven't seen them. My stepmom's been home. She keeps going out and then... then coming back unexpectedly. Weeks of avoiding the house like the plague and

then she suddenly decides to pull this shit on me. I can't..."

The blonde breaks off abruptly and closes his eyes, jaw clenching.

"Are you... okay?" Steve asks hesitantly.

Billy lets out a fierce, huffing breath.

Then, he slams his fist down on the counter.

Steve jumps, startled by the unexpected display, air leaving his lungs abruptly. He feels a sharp stab of something like fear, flashes back to the last time Billy used his fury and his fists on him.

Steve then is thrown even more when, instead of beating Steve to a pulp, Billy bows his head and lets out a sound that is dangerously close to a choked sob.

"No," Billy hisses, eyes still clenched tight. "No. I need... I just need..."

The fist goes flat, presses against the counter as Billy hunches over, shoulders trembling as he tries to hold back what Steve strongly suspects are tears - of misery, of frustration, of pain. The blonde shrinks in on himself, dragging in ragged breaths as though they are the only thing keeping him together.

Steve sucks in his own tiny gasp and something inside of him clenches.

Now, Steve still isn't 100% sure what he thinks of Billy. As he told Robin, Billy tried to kill him twice, has never been particularly kind or approachable, and used to give off every kind of negative vibe that Steve has learned to loathe.

But Billy is, also... well, he's *Billy*.

He's the guy you love to hate – the unexpectedly important word there being 'love'. He's big, he's loud, he's fearless, he's... he's beautiful.

Steve can admit that to himself. Billy is like the sun, with an irresistible orbit even when it hurts to look at him. Bright and

charismatic, the embodiment of an ideal. He's supposed to be fierce and free and cool and gorgeous and confident.

He's not supposed to be timid and frustrated and miserable. And yet, even these new and unexpected traits touch something in Steve, stir something inside that begs for self-expression.

Because Steve... Steve's been there before. He has been the golden child, the keg king, the team captain. He knows what it's like for people to look at you and not see beyond what they expect you to be.

He has been the asshole, the bully. He took all that emptiness and superficiality and secret pain and stupid power and weaponized it, turned it against people who didn't deserve it.

And he has also been a nobody. A nothing.

He spent the half the summer slinging ice cream in a goddamn sailor's suit for Christ sakes.

More than that... he's been friendless. He's been abandoned by his parents, by his social clique, by his girlfriend. He's been left behind before. Sure, he has friends now, great friends, real friends... but he remembers what it's like.

(And he knows very well what it is like to be unable to sleep.)

There's a look in Billy's eyes that is very familiar to Steve. He used to see it all the time in the mirror.

He doesn't like seeing it in Billy.

"I have a VHS player," he blurts out suddenly, unthinkingly.

Billy drags in a grating breath and looks at him blankly, distantly incredulous. The misery in his face shifts, morphs into something like anger.

"Two, actually," Steve fumbles. "I... my parents gave me one for my room. For my birthday. So... one upstairs, one downstairs."

Billy's flat mouth curls into a faint echo of the old derisive sneer he

used to give.

Even this sad shadow is enough to make Steve cringe inwardly.

"Rubbing it in, rich boy?" Billy huffs, blinking back the tears and sadness and replacing them with a superficial performance of aggression. It's a familiar role to play and he falls into it with ease.

"No!" Heady fear and confusion are creeping back in. *Oh shit, pull it together.* "What I mean is... you can use it. My VHS player. It's... you can use it if you need... privacy."

Just like that it is like someone popped the tension between the two boys like a delicate balloon. Billy looks at Steve for a long moment, mouth dropping open slightly and something decidedly close to shock dancing across his face.

Embarrassed, Steve ducks his head slightly, and he knows he's going red in the cheeks again.

"I didn't mean..." Steve starts, shakes his head, curses himself inwardly for his lack of smoothness and tact. "I wasn't trying to be a dick, I'm sorry. I wasn't rubbing it in. I know... believe me, anything nasty you can say about me and my stupid rich parents has already been said. I just... you can use it. You can have it, even. It's no problem. I don't really watch movies that much, so..."

Billy snorts, recovering slightly. He tilts his head and goes a bit wry around the mouth.

"You work in a video store, Harrington."

His voice is still a bit shaky at the edges but it seems to be gaining strength. That's good. Maybe...

"I know." Relieved at the slight easing of tension in Billy's stance, Steve sighs in faux-defeat and grins slightly. "Robin and Keith are trying to educate me. Keith never forgave me for saying one of my favorite movies is *Fast Times* and then breaking the display by accident. He called me 'irredeemably lowbrow'. Every day is a new insult in good old Family Home Video."

Billy, weirdly, doesn't seem put off by the conversation. If anything, he seems less fragile and fractured and more interested than he has at any point previously, so Steve decides to keep going, play it up a bit.

He can play the class clown if that helps.

"I go over to Robin's to watch movies because she has a lot of them on tape," he says, adopting a more relaxed posture and tone. "She buys them from this weird indie store, and she's got all these ones in other languages with and without subtitles because she's like this word genius. She made me watch this one Swedish thing, *Persona*, which I didn't understand at all – she said it was by Bergman and I thought we were watching *Casablanca* or something like that! And then there was this other one, *La Cage aux Fo... erm... Folles*, yeah, which was French but still good. There were subtitles for that at least."

"*La Cage aux Folles*, huh?" Billy murmurs thoughtfully.

Belatedly, Steve recognizes a potential pitfall, curses himself in his head. Jeesh, he hears one rumor about Billy maybe being gay and suddenly he's completely throwing caution to the wind.

Robin is right. He's an idiot.

Uncertain about what Billy's position on this is - and there is a very real possibility that any minute now Billy may take offence, may show derision or even rage - but determined not to give an inch, he straightens. He braces himself, ready to take the slur whenever Billy choses to throw it.

"Yeah," he says with admirable firmness, gazing warily back at the blonde. "Yeah, that was it. I really liked it a lot. Great movie."

He says it as a dare, as someone who is questioning his own thoughts and feelings a lot these days and refuses to apologize for it. As someone who has searched his own heart and found it strangely open and not at all wanting.

More importantly, he says it as someone with a friend whom he will protect with everything in him.

If Billy wants to call him names and call his sexuality into question in some brutal macho contest of wills that's fine, but the most important thing now is protecting Robin.

He will not allow any slights or insults against her.

However, Billy does not stiffen or sneer. He doesn't call Steve a name, or threaten retribution.

Instead, he slides his gaze away, chewing on his lower lip, and then returns it, curious, to Steve's face.

"You... you ever see *The Boys in the Band*?" Billy asks, quietly. "Or, uh... anything by John Waters?"

Steve blinks once. Twice. Then his mouth spreads into a grin.

"No, I haven't. Um... are they good?"

Billy shakes his head, almost amused. He looks so tired. Too tired, to Steve's eyes. "Yeah. Not sure you'll be able to find them in a Hawkins video store but yeah, pretty boy, they're alright."

"Maybe... maybe I can get Robin to find copies. Would... I mean..." Steve takes a deep breath and plunges in feet first. "If she can find them, would you like to see them? With... me? Us?"

Billy sucks a deep breath in, uncertainty and fear and just a little unnamable thing - not hope exactly, but something like the seeds of hope - warring on his face.

Because no one has asked him to share his time with them like this... not for a long time. And Billy, to his chagrin, finds that actually he does want to watch special, important movies with Steve. Maybe even with his friend, Robin. That sounds so... nice. Peaceful. Perfect, almost.

Impossible.

Steve swallows past something stuck in his throat. He can feel Billy almost pulling away right now and he knows in his gut that he can't let that happen. He's not going to panic right now.

Thinking never does him any good so he's just going to go on instinct. That strategy has definitely worked out for him so far with absolutely no negative consequences.

And... fuck, if he's reading this all wrong, at least he offered. At least he is trying to be a friend to somebody who needs it and who, maybe, isn't quite the super-asshole he thought he was.

If anyone could use a friend it's Billy fucking Hargrove.

"Keep the videos," Steve says abruptly, making the decision for both of them before they can overthink it. "I get off at four. Come over to my house when you can any time after that. My parents are going to be gone all week for a work thing so there won't be anyone there but me. I can put the TV and VCR in the guest bedroom and I'll stay downstairs. All night, if you want. You can have the room all night."

"You're serious," Billy asks, still unable to quite wrap his head around this. "You're... you're offering... you do know what I'm planning on doing while I watch these tapes, right pretty boy?"

Steve splutters and goes an even deeper shade of red.

"Yeah, of course I do, Jesus," he mutters, ducking his head and shooting an embarrassed grin up at the blonde.

"I tried to kill you," Billy says bluntly, and Steve has to bury a flinch before the other boy catches it. "Even before... I kicked the shit out of you."

Yeah, there is that. Maybe Steve really is an idiot for doing this.

Robin's going to have a field day when he tells her.

"I..." Steve sighs. "You really fucked me up, you know that? But I get it, kind of. Things were so messy and... I'm over it. We... the people who know... we've got to stick together, you know? We're the only ones who know about what really happen this summer and even if we weren't... we're cool, man. You and me. Besides, I've had worse. Recently, in fact. I know this might come as a blow to your ego, Hargrove, but you're not the biggest monster out there."

The minute the words are out Steve wants to kick himself. Really? *He* is saying this to *Billy*?! He can almost feel Robin and Dustin together face-palming from afar.

For a long moment a tense silence floats between the two young men, the heavy weight of their shared past and trauma teetering on a razor's edge, ready to tip either way. Make or break.

Then, finally, Billy huffs out a small, barely-there laugh.

"Jeesh, Harrington," he shakes his head, bemused. "Yeah, no shit."

"No shit," Steve echoes, a grin tugging on the corners of his mouth.

"And you still...?"

"Yes," Steve interrupts, that determined stance creeping back into his shoulders. "Yeah. I'm still offering. Come over and we can hang out, or not... no judgment. Honestly. You can just go straight upstairs if you want, and I won't bother you. I'll get a pizza and you can stay as long as you want and... fuck's sake, Billy, of course I know what you're going to be doing! But I understand. Really, I do. More than you know. And this way it'll be private and..."

Steve bites his lip and throws Billy a look that Billy can't read. It's a look that is weirdly knowing, utterly empathetic, terribly vulnerable and raw.

"I'll stay downstairs and nobody will interrupt. You know? It'll be safe. I'll... you know. You won't have to worry. You'll be *safe*."

Oh.

Oh.

Something incredibly important clicks in Billy's brain.

Yeah. Wasn't that it? Wasn't that the thing, the reason, the problem Billy didn't want to admit to himself?

It's not safe. I don't feel safe. I never feel safe, now.

Too vulnerable. Too scared. Too exposed.

Close my eyes and it all comes back. Close my eyes and I don't know what will be there when I open them again. I don't know if I'll be back in that dark, terrible basement when I open them again.

I can't relax enough and I can't rest and I can't let myself go. I can't touch myself and let go because... because it isn't safe.

But this time Steve will be there, downstairs, while Billy takes time to relearn his body, to pleasure himself in peace.

Billy should beat Steve up for this, for these sweeping assumptions, for even suggesting that Billy might be struggling because he is scared. For redefining Billy as the one in need of care and protection. For taking that 'tough guy' identity that Billy uses as a shield and comprehensively blowing it to bits.

Except he's not blowing it to bits, is he? He's looking at him with eyes big with honesty and understanding - and not pity. Not condescension. Like he knows and he doesn't think less of Billy and he's still willing to provide cover because what Billy needs isn't terrible or humiliating or wrong.

Like he doesn't think less of Billy for this. If anything, there is something shining in Steve's eyes that mirrors the gentle glow of hope growing in Billy's chest.

Billy trusts Steve, weirdly, and maybe he shouldn't. Maybe that's a completely stupid thing to do, given their history. Maybe this is all a setup, a precursor to Steve's long-term revenge.

But Billy doesn't think so. Steve isn't like that. He doesn't know Steve that well, but he does know that Steve isn't like that.

Billy is tired, and alone, at the end of his rope - and he trusts Steve's offer of sanctuary because Steve knows about all these horrible monsters, and also he's a secret badass, a bruised angel willing to crash cars and throw fireworks and swing baseball bats. He knows what's out there, knows what Billy fears, and he doesn't think it's stupid or pathetic that Billy is afraid.

Of course he doesn't - he's seen the face of it, too. Billy doesn't have to justify himself. He doesn't have to explain it, any of it, to Steve.

Steve will keep Billy safe.

No parents.

No interruptions.

No monsters coming in and getting him the moment he closes his eyes.

Billy swallows heavily and feels a flicker of his old self flash to life again.

"I feel like you're propositioning me," he says, "but if you are it's the weirdest offer I've ever had."

A surprised laugh rips out unbidden from Steve's throat and the answering grin on Billy's face is worth absolutely everything.

Notes for the Chapter:

So, true and funny story - back when video rental stores were still a thing there was this tiny independent one in my (fairly tiny) hometown, and if you asked the manager and were over 18 there was a real, honest to God, super-secret back room behind the counter full of porn videos you could rent.

I have no idea if it was legal or ethical or what-have-you - mostly because it was so obviously hidden and not advertised and not something anyone was supposed to talk about, so you felt like it had to be illegal somehow - but the teen boys in the neighborhood were always trying to get an adult to rent something for them. It was also a hilarious game to see who was in the know about it and who had no

idea it was back there... I never saw it for myself personally but I heard about it from friends. It was probably the worst kept secret in town until the store finally closed, about the same time the Blockbusters up the street died and Netflix became a thing.

So, this kind of option for Billy? It's based in fact!!

A note on the films mentioned: "Persona" has a lot of homoerotic subtext and "La Cage Aux Folles" is a very famous comedy later remade into the "The Birdcage" with Robin Williams and Nathan Lane. John Waters films are famously camp and outrageous, and while the "The Boys in the Band" gets some mixed reviews in the LGBTQ community I think Billy would probably be completely fascinated with any film that depicted homosexual relationships. Also, not loads of obvious queer films to choose from pre-1980s, although if you have any recommendations please let me know!

Next chapter: Billy finally gets to beat the meat!

Kudos and comments are always much loved, as are you guys! Stay safe and healthy! <3

3. We can't rewind (we've gone to far)

Notes for the Chapter:

Some heavy angst in this chapter

The rest of the afternoon floats by as if Billy is dreaming.

Maybe he is. God knows he's sleep-deprived enough that he probably could slip into a walking coma right now and not be able to tell the difference.

Anyway, things seem a bit fuzzy now, and comfortably warm. The light seems softer.

It's not quite the same thing as feeling peaceful or happy or high, but it's a gentler thing than anything Billy has experienced since he was taken by the Mind Flayer, and maybe even for a good while before that. It's not quite sleep, but it is a slight easing of tension that lightens the load of exhausting, constant pain.

Niggling at the edges of it is a new kind of fear - fear that this feeling will go away, that he'll ruin it somehow. But the fear is not enough to outweigh the rest. Not yet.

He goes home and goes to his room, still dazed, and grabs a change of clothes, his many bottles of pills, his toothbrush. He stuffs them into his carrier bag along with the porno tapes, a bottle of lotion (he hesitates before including this at first, but then decides that he doesn't want to presume), and a few extra bucks from his cash stash just in case Steve wants help paying for the pizza.

He's still got hours before Steve gets off work but he doesn't want to stay at home. He thinks he might go for a drive, swing by the convenience store for more cigarettes, park in front of Harrington's house and nap.

Maybe he should try to pick up a case of beer. Would that be too much, too forward of him? He isn't completely sure whether Steve wants to share drinking time with him - there aren't exactly

guidelines for this - but maybe the beer could be a nice 'thank you'. He'll think about it on the way and make a decision when he gets to the store.

Regardless, he doesn't want to be stuck in his house anymore - and isn't that a revelation, a massive turn-around?

A miracle - He wants to go out.

He's in the kitchen in the middle of writing a vague note full of apologies and excuses to leave on the fridge when Max walks in.

"You're up," she says, bemused and uncertain. Not that Billy was consistently keeping to a schedule but he supposes he is usually still locked away in his room at this time of day.

"Yeah," he says. "I'm going out for the night."

"What?" Max's eyebrows shoot up. "Really?"

"Ye... Yeah," Billy steadies himself as he finishes writing the note. It's breathtaking and alarming how shaky his confidence is, that even the smallest doubts can threaten its stability.

"You're... are you sure that's...?"

Billy blinks slowly and looks up at Max, fixes her with a dark gaze.

"I'm not possessed anymore, Maxine," he says, careful to keep stubborn threads of hurt out of his voice. "I have my meds and I have my toothbrush and I have my car. I'm 18 years old. I'm going out for the night."

"I didn't say that. I didn't mean that," she says quietly, and he looks at her, really looks, and sees that no, she didn't. "I just meant... are you okay? Because I'm here if you're not okay. Please..."

Max's face twitches as she fights to repress a look of fear and grief.

"Please don't..." she continues before cutting herself off.

His stomach swoops, and he feels a twinge of guilt but also

something else, something nearly good.

Warm, like the dream he's in.

"I'm going to Steve Harrington's house," he says, matching her quiet, soft tone. "He said we could hang out and... watch movies. He said I could spend the night if I wanted so I wouldn't have to drive home late."

Max takes this in, face brightening slightly with each word, and Billy's guilt deepens.

She isn't supposed to be his caretaker. He's the older of the two, he should be the one looking out for her (even if he used to do so with bitter reluctance), but instead he's gone and eaten up her days, made her worry and fret about his health and state of mind.

And now he's scared her into thinking that, in his depression and despair, he was going to do something reckless and harmful, either to himself or to someone else.

The problem with people caring about you is that they care about you, and not always in a way that is convenient. Still, it's nice to know that she worries about him a little. Beneath the guilt the warm feeling remains.

He's got more to ask of her now, unfortunately.

"Don't tell Neil where I went, okay?" he says, heartbeat picking up with his rising anxiety. "You can tell him I'm with friends or something but don't tell him about Harrington. Please. I don't want him to call, for Steve to have to deal with that. I'll tell him something when I get home, if he asks."

"He won't ask, probably," Max replies, shrugging, and she's right.

Neil has, weirdly enough, taken a massive step back from Billy since Starcourt. There is something in his eyes now that isn't fear exactly, but is certainly a kind of wariness. As if he can sense that Billy is beyond him now, has seen or done things that place him outside of his father's grasp.

He looks at his son a little like one might look at a deadly snake in a not-quite-secure cage.

It's a relief, to say the least, and Billy isn't one to push his luck. He can thank this new development for the fact that Neil will probably be so secretly happy to have a family meal that doesn't involve Billy staring blankly at nothing like a specter at the feast that he won't remember that he should be seriously concerned about where Billy is and what he's up to.

Once he remembers all the things Billy can do to upset the apple cart, he'll crack down again. Until then, though, Billy is relatively, blessedly free.

Distantly, Billy thinks that he should start making plans to move out before Neil realizes that Billy is just as susceptible to screaming and fists and double-bolted doors as he ever was.

That's new, too. Plans. Thinking about the future. Hasn't cared about that in a long time.

God, he must be getting delirious.

"I'm sorry," he murmurs, tilting his head slightly and shooting his sister a look. "If I'm dropping you in the shit with him..."

"No," Max shakes her head, smiling slightly. "No, don't worry. You're not. You should go and have fun. Steve's a total dork but he's kind of cool, too. Do you have your meds?"

Billy huffs a sigh and holds up his bag.

"Yes, mom."

Max rolls her eyes and mutters something uncomplimentary under her breath, but she doesn't mean it and they both know it, and Billy shuffles out the door with a slight grin threatening to spread across his face.

Billy does decide to get the beer, in the end. It's a small thing, really, especially when Steve is doing him such a big, unusual favor that they will absolutely never talk about again after this, but he figures it's better than nothing, placing the two six-packs in the back of his Camaro with care. He even splurged on the more expensive brand, and his cheeks go a little pink when he thinks about why.

After getting the beer and his cigarettes he drives around, refamiliarizing himself with his old haunts and routes, abandoned after his experiences sapped all his wanderlust away. Hawkins doesn't have the same vibe as the long, sweeping highways of California but it's better than the four walls of his room. Tasting fresh air again for what feels like the first time in ages, he makes his way towards the Harrington abode.

He's already waiting outside when Steve pulls up, and he even managed a 20 minute nap before the cold sweats and nightmares returned. Pulling himself together he climbs out of the car as Steve does, and walks up the driveway as the brunette retrieves a hefty stack of pizza boxes from his backseat.

"If I was my old suave self," Steve calls as Billy walks up, "I'd have this whole slick opening-the-door-while-raising-my-eyebrow-seductively thing I'd do for you. I'd probably be welcoming you to 'Casa de Harrington' or something completely cheesy and stupid like that."

"Sorry I'm missing it," Billy responds with mild amusement.

"Shouldn't be. Is that for us?" Steve nods at the six-packs Billy has tucked under his arm.

"For you, yeah. To say thanks."

Steve smiles. "We can share. Can you take these...?"

"Sure."

Billy balances his bag and the beer on his arm and accepts the pizza boxes handed to him while Steve places another plastic bag full of unseen items on his own stack. Billy recognizes the bag as the same

kind they use at Family Home Video.

"Sure you got enough?" Billy throws the brunette the ghost of a smirk.

"Please, like you couldn't easily eat three of these at least. I know I could, I'm starving. We had a rush and Keith made me work through my lunch break."

"What's that?" Billy asks, nodding at Steve's plastic bag.

Steve blinks in confusion and then blushes slightly.

"Oh... um... well, I didn't know what you wanted... if you wanted to be left alone for the whole night tonight or if you wanted to maybe watch movies with me...real movies, I mean, with me, so I got some from the store I thought you might, erm... that we could watch. If you wanted. With me. Or I could just watch them on my own. Whatever."

Hiding a wince at his own awkwardness, Steve slams the car door shut behind him with his foot and starts leading Billy up the walk to the Harrington house, juggling the pizza boxes and bag of tapes as he fishes his keys out of his pocket.

"I got *Terminator*," Steve continues babbling, sweetly nervous in a way that Billy can't help but find endearing. "I thought you might like that because of last Halloween, you know? You went as Arnie, right, at the party? That wasn't a reference I didn't get? Because Robin keeps tell me that I haven't seen enough movies, so if you were dressed up as someone else I might have misunderstood."

"Yeah," Billy blinks at Steve in surprise. "Yeah, I was the Terminator for the party. I went and saw it at Hawk Theater the day before. The outfit was easy because it's just the jacket, really... I can't believe you remember that."

"Night we met," Steve grins, although the grin fades immediately. "Not... not to make it weird, just..."

"Glad to see I made an impression," Billy gives Steve a wolfish smirk that he doesn't really feel, although he is significantly more into it

than he has been into anything else in a long time. He wants to reward Steve for what he's done, so he saves the brunette from floundering, throws him a line back. "You got *Risky Business* in there, too?"

The quip doesn't have the intended effect. Steve's face falls slightly and he turns away from Billy so he can unlock his front door. The pizza boxes wobble precariously.

"Ah, no," he says. "No. Good catch, I was supposed to be Tom Cruise at the party, but... that, um, was Nancy's pick. You know Nancy... Nancy Wheeler? Anyway, I also got *Star Wars*, *Teen Wolf*, and *Ghostbusters*. They seemed pretty doable. If I don't get around to seeing them Dustin can always watch 'em."

The lock bolt slides back and the door to the house swings open when Steve pushes it. The brunette gestures inside with a dramatic sweep of his arms.

"Welcome to Casa de Harrington," he says with goofy good cheer.

"Yeah, pretty terrible," Billy sighs, a smile tugging at his lips.

"Warned you," Steve replies, unoffended. "But it's too late, you're here now. No escape."

Billy follows Steve in to the stupidly big house, its wide hallway opening up into a sizable living room. Billy quickly takes in the stocked bar on a side table, the expensive art on the walls, the large TV, the uncomfortable looking furniture.

It's all very impressive, maybe, and in another life he thinks he would be intimidated, defensive, destructive. All his usual reactions to the sight of wealth and power dangling just out of his grasp.

His focus is mostly on Steve, though, rather than the décor. It's kind of hard to see anything else when something really beautiful is right there in front of him.

And even though the other boy is tired and distracted and still wearing that dorky uniform vest with the nametag, he remains a striking, lovely thing.

Billy also notes how alienated Steve seems within this space. It is his home, undoubtedly, and he moves around with familiarity, though not with real ease.

More than anything, Billy feels like Steve would look better stretched out on a grassy lawn with leaves in his hair, or streaked with oil and engine grease, or sweaty and ruined and exhausted like when they play basketball together.

This fussy old room doesn't fit with the strange, fierce, lovely wildness he knows lives inside Steve. The strength he's seen in him time after time.

(And he really, really, really needs to stop thinking like this. This way lies madness, and he's already too close to edge of darkness as it is.)

"Is it weird?" Steve asks suddenly.

"What?" Billy blinks, dragged out of his musings.

"All this?" Steve gestures vaguely - at what exactly Billy doesn't know, but he's taking the gesture to mean the house, the situation, their new and ill-defined relationship... in a word, 'everything'. Steve puts his pizza boxes down onto the small coffee table in the center of the room and motions for Billy to do the same.

"After you left the store today," he continues, "I starting thinking that I probably made it awkward and weird, asking you over like this, and... I'm sorry if I did. Genuinely, if you want to pretend this is like a hotel and I'm just a bellhop and just ignore me, you totally can. I won't be offended. It's your choice, and I don't want you to feel like you owe me anything at all, because this really isn't something... I'm happy you're here, no matter what you want to do."

Billy involuntarily makes a small, disbelieving noise, and it's enough to catch Steve out mid-speech.

He thinks Steve might snap at him now, all piss and vinegar, but he doesn't rise to the unspoken jab. Instead, Steve shoots Billy a strangely wounded look before making a kind of half-shrug gesture and glancing away.

"Billy, I...", Steve sucks in a breath. "You almost died. So many people have died and you almost..."

Steve trails off, having once again managed to knock the air out of the other boy, completely without meaning to.

"It's been so sad," Steve shakes his head, voice tinny and sharp with repressed grief. "So many people are gone because of what happened with the Mind Flayer. People I knew growing up. And Hopper, and... I'm just happy there's someone around. It's... it's lonelier now, somehow, in Hawkins. The world feels more dangerous. I grew up here, I'm home, but sometimes it's like we're all stuck in the Upside Down nightmare world still, and I can't seem to find my balance, anything normal. The only thing that keeps me from going crazy is being with other people who understand what happened, so... I'm glad you're here, even if it's just to use my guest bedroom. I'm glad you're alive and safe. I'm glad we're... whatever it is we are. But apparently the days of me being cool about... well, anything, are completely gone, so if it's weird it's probably my fault."

It is weird, Billy thinks, but not for the reasons Steve says.

It's weird because of how un-weird it is. It's weird because Billy understands exactly what Steve is saying - he feels so isolated now, and the only saving grace is when he can find something or someone that ties him to reality, helps him plant his feet firmly on the ground.

It's weird because Billy finds himself slipping into something easy and comfortable with this boy he barely knows, without even needing to make the effort.

They shouldn't be friends, him and Harrington, and, yes, Billy is technically only here so he can borrow Steve's spare bedroom for his own very private reasons.

And yet, here they are. Talking. Surviving. Making the nonsensical make sense.

"It isn't weird," Billy says, unsure himself if this is the truth or not, and also unconcerned about it. He puts his boxes down and then lowers himself onto the floor. It seems less awkward to settle himself

down there than on the fancy couch. "What kind of pizza did you get?"

"Peperoni, cheese, sausage, veggie." Steve points to each as he goes. "And..." he slips his hand into his pocket and, after a moment of rummaging, pulls out a little plastic baggie filled with something unmistakable. "Keith hooked me up."

Just when Billy thinks that Steve Harrington has run out of ways to surprise him, he is proven wrong.

"Stoner Steve," he huffs, the corners of his mouth tugging up in shocked amusement. "Yeah, sure, light us up."

"You want something to drink first?"

"Beer's fine."

"Great, I'll... wait," Steve's brow furrows. "Are you still on medication or anything?"

Billy's mouth goes unpleasantly dry. He accepts a paper towel from the roll Steve hands him and distracts himself momentarily by selecting a piece of pizza. Once he's chosen a few slices, he sets them down on the napkin.

Then, slowly, he reaches over and grabs his carrier bag.

Steve takes up his own spot on the floor - as Billy suspected, furniture is beyond them both at the moment - and watches Billy, rolling a blunt distractedly as the blonde opens his bag and pulls out the case with his pills.

Billy feels weirdly safe in this moment, doing this thing which in any other circumstances would seem like an egregious act of self-exposure. Far from feeling violated, he feels almost like a kid again, showing a cool rock or a dead squirrel to a friend.

The pills are like his little cabinet of curiosities, the proof of his own unique fucked-up-ness. For the first time ever there's a niggles of pride and vindication that comes with looking at them.

"You got a whole pharmacy there," Steve comments, voice free of judgment.

"It's mostly for pain," Billy says, spreading them out. "I had stuff to fight an infection but who knows what kind of germs the Mind Flayer had on it... I doubt penicillin would do much good. And I also have the pills Owens gave me. I'm not sure what they do but I'm afraid to stop taking them."

"That guy creeps me out," Steve says. "I'm starting to really hate doctors. And government people. Anyone in a uniform or a suit."

"I'm afraid if I stop taking them I'll..." Billy starts and stops abruptly. His voice is barely more than a whisper but even that seems jarring and over-loud.

No, he can't say it. It's too much. He can't say it out loud.

I'll melt. Explode. Collapse and be absorbed into a giant monster.

Just like all the others.

So, yeah, he survived. That's great.

And the pills are both the proof and the price he pays for it.

"Will it fuck with your meds if you smoke?" Steve asks, dragging Billy back to himself.

"Probably," Billy says, motioning to the newly rolled blunt. "Who give's a fuck? Hand it over, Harrington."

Steve hums and complies, handing him the joint and letting him light up while he turns and pops one of his rental tapes - *Star Wars*, Billy can read the label - into VCR under the big television. Billy inhales deeply and lets the hit land, refusing to feel anxious about what he's doing.

He tells himself he'll not overdo it. Besides, he can't fuck himself up worse than he already has. He managed to ruin his life just by being in the wrong place at the wrong time, so there's something affirming about making this deliberate choice now.

Most importantly, he gets to sleep here tonight.

He can be free tonight.

Steve grabs his own slice of pizza and accepts the joint back when Billy offers it.

"Can't believe you smoke, Harrington," Billy says, coughing slightly. "Dark horse."

"I had my own thing," Steve says with a strange abruptness, eyes falling on the pill bottles before he drags them up again to meet Billy's gaze. "Way back... I guess Max told you about all the shit that was going on when we first met? Around when we had the fight?"

Billy nods, glances away to watch yellow text scroll up the TV screen.

"I couldn't sleep after," Steve continues. "I couldn't see a doctor for obvious reasons, and drinking didn't help... made it worse. This helped."

Billy sees the statement for what it is - an offering, equal to Billy showing him his pills. Maybe that's why it's easy to be with Steve, Billy thinks. They're both fucked up in different ways for the same reasons.

He eats his pizza. His gaze darts between the TV and Steve for a few moments - Steve, whose face is an unreadable mask. Or maybe Billy just doesn't want to read it.

Billy takes the joint when Steve hands it to him, takes a hit and then gives it back. He takes a swig of beer and another bite of pizza.

"Because of me?" he asks, keeping his voice deliberately steady. "You weren't sleeping because..."

"No, Billy," Steve hums, a thin wire of something unbreakable in his voice. "It wasn't because of you. It's... it wasn't your fault."

John Williams's full orchestral might blares through the living room, and Steve's eyes flick away from Billy's to latch onto the action happening on-screen.

The weed and the beer and the pizza take effect quickly after that, and even though Billy doesn't quite believe Steve - the one truth Billy knows is that it is all his fault - he allows himself to sink down into the distant, sleepy warmth of it all.

Maybe the peaceful companionship that floats between them is all a lie, or a weird mix of psychotropic substances, or temporary, but it doesn't matter right now.

In fact, time passes and Billy is so relaxed he even forgets why he's there in the first place. Together, the boys watch *Star Wars*, and then *Terminator*.

Billy eats - he's hungry, really hungry, for the first time in ages. The pizza is good; for once, food doesn't taste like ash and metal in his mouth as he chews. He actually has the munchies, God help him.

And Harrington is surprisingly funny and cheerful and kind. Billy enjoys snarking with him as they talk and watching the other boy's face go slack when he focuses on the film.

Billy doesn't smile or laugh much, isn't terribly chatty, but when Steve goes giggly and happy and witty it almost feels like he's doing it for the both of them, allowing Billy to feel that joy by proxy. Billy feels the icy core of himself melting incrementally inside.

Who knew he'd actually *like* Steve Harrington if he spent time with him?

Steve cuts them both off after one shared joint, reluctant to seriously threaten Billy's health. The pizza disappears quickly, and then the beer follows, and then it's time to pick another movie. The pause causes Billy to glance up at the clock and then he realizes, with no small amount of surprise, that it's 9 pm.

Just like that, it stops being a question of whether he wants more pizza or what movie is next, and starts being a question of *if* he and Steve will watch another movie tonight.

His choice. Steve said it was his choice.

9 pm. Not late, but not early. A polite, in-between time.

And he's here for a reason, remember? How could he fucking forget?

Steve looks up at the clock at the same time and sees what Billy sees. Just like that the warmth and comradery fades and an uneasy silence falls. The brunette pokes his stack of rented VHS tapes and shoots Billy a questioning look.

Equally unsure, Billy hums. He makes a decision... a safe decision. His choice.

Wordlessly, he collects his stuff, and stands.

And stalls.

"I..." Billy frowns. The porno tapes in his bag feel like giant, laughing, annoying boulders and he wishes they would spontaneously catch fire. Since the moment he decided to rent them they've been like millstones around his neck - salvation and failure all rolled up into one - and now he wishes they were somewhere where he didn't have to acknowledge them at all.

"Well," Steve says, feeling weird and awkward and shy. "Um, I'll be downstairs if you want to... to come downstairs after. But you might just want to sleep..."

Billy nods, taking the out the other boy offers. He'll stay upstairs, he won't come back down. This is it. He doesn't need to put a deadline on anything, doesn't need to make promises he might not be able to keep. Who knows how long this will take?

And, even though he thinks he might like to spend more time watching movies with Steve, he also thinks it might be impossible to look the other boy in the eye after... this.

It makes him sad, awfully sad, to think that this was a one-time thing, spending time smoking and eating pizza and watching silly puppets and spaceships on TV with pretty, gentle, funny Steve Harrington, the boy with the doe-eyes who drives him crazy.

With the boy who apparently understands what he's doing and why, and who - and this is the strangest thing of all - doesn't seem to be judging him for any of it.

Billy thinks he would have liked to have this, in another life. He would have liked to be with Steve, as a friend if nothing else. He would have liked to share more time with the boy. He would have tried hard to be the kind of person a person like Steve might have liked and valued.

He'd like to keep this... but it isn't his. It's just a one-time thing.

Oh well.

"Ye... yeah," he says finally. "Thanks. I think I might just go to bed, actually. I'm... the meds make me sleep, and with the weed I..."

"Yep, absolutely," Steve cuts him off in a burst of inappropriate enthusiasm, and then winces when he realizes how that sounds. "I mean. Yeah. Well. I'll be here, so... goodnight, Billy."

"Yeah. Goodnight, Steve. Thank you. I mean it."

Steve nods hesitantly, eyes doubtful.

Billy decides that he regrets everything.

Billy grabs his stuff and lumbers out of the room, down the hall, up the stairs. Steve stands, suddenly twitchy and anxious, and makes like he's going to follow, but stops when Billy waves him off.

Even without Steve's directions, Billy finds the guest room easily enough. If he pauses briefly at the door to the room he can see is Steve's, fighting against the urge to explore it secretly... well, he's just pausing to catch his breath.

He doesn't actually go in. He figures he does owe Steve that much.

For all Steve's jokes about Casa de Harrington operating as a hotel, the guest room does a pretty good impression of actually being something out of a Hilton. It is very neat and comfortable and cold, fussily furnished like the rest of the house, and with an ensuite

bathroom which Billy greatly appreciates.

If nothing else, it should make clean-up a lot easier, and he won't have to share with an almost-teenage girl either.

In fact, he appreciates the whole set-up. The nightstand and dresser aren't repurposed crates, and the bed is twice the size of his dinky single and is covered in a duvet that is smooth and soft. Even more than finally getting some sexual satisfaction from tonight, he's looking forward to (hopefully) sleeping on those freshly laundered sheets.

There aren't photos or posters or dirty clothes or empty pharmacy bags lying around, just catalog-style furnishings and nothing else. Nothing is shoddy or second-hand. It's anonymous and distant, and while he wouldn't want to live here there is also nothing in the room that he could see that could trigger any kind of panic attack or remind him of the depressing limits of his stupid little existence.

Besides the TV and VCR Steve had set up and plugged in some time between a bathroom break and the third pizza, the room could have belonged to anyone, anywhere.

It feels a bit silly, but suddenly overcome with a strange need to postpone the moment Billy goes through the motions of preparing for bed. He uses the ensuite to take a shower - he takes some time to luxuriate under the hot water, able to relax without listening for Max or his dad banging on the door. When he's done he dries his hair and brushes his teeth. He doesn't bother putting his clothes back on, choosing to wrap a towel around himself instead.

He avoids looking in the bathroom mirror. He doesn't want to study his reflection, his scars, all the ways he has changed.

He's made an art form out of hiding from himself these past few weeks.

Anyway... he's not here to navel gaze. When he decides he can't delay anymore, he exits the bathroom and sits down on the side of the bed. After a moment's consideration he rummages through his bag, removes a pill bottle, and shakes two white tablets out. He stands

again and goes to the bathroom for water to wash them down, and, having taken them, returns to the bedroom.

Okay.

Okay.

Steve had positioned the VCR and TV on a spare nightstand at the bottom of the bed, attaching all the wires that needed to be attached so Billy was all good to go. He'd even included a little remote on top of the VCR.

Feeling strangely adrift, Billy has shake his head at the whole situation.

"You'd be an okay bellhop, Harrington," he murmurs to himself, plucking a tape at random from his bag.

Billy pops the tape into the VCR, hears the familiar click and whirl of the machine. The screen is blue and then snowy, and then the title card (poorly made, clearly tacked on) is up.

Billy scoots back on the bed, tries to get comfortable. In a way this almost feels like actual sex - masturbation for him has never been never this deliberate, this coordinated.

In spite of this, a weird loneliness tugs at his heart.

He tries not to overthink it, and also tries not to look down at the starfish-shaped scars on his naked chest.

Now that the moment has arrived, it is utterly anti-climactic.

He watches blankly as what passes for introductory plot meanders quickly across the screen. Perhaps it's the weed mixing with his meds, but it feels a little like he's watching and hearing things under water.

Lovely Lola is seducing her two gentlemen callers, both of whom show as much interest in each other as they do in her. Billy can see faked smiles and hear faked moans, his own feelings reflected in the glazed expression in everyone's eyes.

Billy pushes his hand down under his towel.

He wonders what Steve would think of the movie.

He sees breasts. Cocks. Bellies. Erections.

(He can't help but feel that the ease with which these men rise to the occasion - haha - is taunting him a little. His own member doesn't seem to have gotten the message yet.)

The actors move around each other. The characters and plot and pretensions fade away.

Steve, sun-kissed and pretty under the florescent lights of Family Home Video, looks at him with those liquid-brown eyes and offers him the use of his guest bedroom.

He says...

He says...

You'll be safe here. With me.

I'll keep you safe.

Safe.

Lovely Lola moans and the men move forward. They start the dance.

Steve licks pizza grease off his lips and grins at him, says something in a bad Schwarzenegger accent and then giggles at his own dumb joke.

Skin. Naked skin. Miles of it, unblemished and shaved and blandly perfect... realized and represented in grainy, poor quality celluloid.

Steve yawns and stretches in place on the floor, his arms reaching above his head, a strip of exposed skin where his shirt hikes up. Pale, mole-dotted skin, soft and smooth, illuminated by the light blue of the TV screen.

Hands. Mouths open. Wet and red.

Steve juggles a stack of pizza boxes, grinning his self-deprecating grin, the

late-afternoon sunlight highlighting golden strands in his hair.

Hands moving. Mouths full. Red and wet.

Leaking.

It's all leaking out...

Steve hands him a beer. His fingers are long and graceful.

Steve laughs, smiles, eyes bright.

Hands moving. Bodies moving.

Falling together.

Falling apart.

Steve twists on the floor, reaching for...

Repetitive motion.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

Same old.

Same old.

Billy fondles his cock.

Even as he does so he knows what will happen.

No good.

He feels. He feels so much.

He feels nothing, he walks through a fog all day, every day, but

then... when he lets go...

He feels too much. He touches himself and he feels it and it is lovely and wonderful and...

It feels like being carved open.

Pain. Deep down where he can't touch it, can't reach it, can't fix it.

Can't heal.

This time when the panic comes, there isn't a coherent fear attached. It's just a wave, slick and sickening, covering everything. Billy's shaking hand loses his grip as fear and self-loathing drain every spark of arousal out of his body.

He cries out. Miserable and despairing and too loud, too loud.

Hates it. He *hates it*...

He's a ghost, he's dead, he's supposed to be dead, he can't be loud, can't scream, can't cry...

Can't cry...

Broken.

He lashes out, knocking a lamp off the bedside table, and releases a raw, keening sound, animal and ugly.

It takes the last of the strength out of his body - the last of his air.

He cries out again, forgetting himself.

It's gone. It's *gone* and he won't get it back... doesn't feel his body reacting at all in any way that makes sense...

He's supposed to be dead. It doesn't make sense for his body to be here after everything that happened. Everything he was, everything he could have been, everything inside of him is dead, dead and gone... so why, why, why is he still *here*, still *breathing*...

He doesn't want to be here anymore.

He shouldn't still be feeling things after everything that happened. He wants to feel but he can't and it hurts how numb, how numb, how numb...

And now his body is going to correct that error made by chance or fate or the universe, is going to kill him for real because he can't breathe, he's panicking, panicking like he did that night at the warehouse, the air knocked out of him as he's dragged down, down, down the steep metal staircase...

A ghost. Just a ghost. I'm nothing, nothing, nothing...

Just a ghost.

Lola moans loudly and Billy flings himself at the TV, fumbling desperately and switching it off. He can't breath, but he needs it off...

He needs it all to stop.

Just when Billy feels like he's going to pass out, like breathing is an impossible thing that will never happen again, there is a sharp knock on the door.

"Billy?"

Surprise - no, actual genuine shock, like he's been slapped in the face - sends a sharp breath like a knife into Billy's lungs.

It hurts, but it's air.

It's *air*. In and out of his lungs, right where it should be.

"I'm... I'm sorry," Steve calls through the closed door.

Broken.

Breathing.

Still alive, Billy thinks with a distant wryness. *If you had any brains at all you'd just stop, but no... you're still breathing, dammit.*

"I know I said I'd leave you alone, but I was just coming upstairs to

get changed and... did something fall? Are you okay...?"

For all the walls Billy has built within himself, unconsciously yet with devastating effectiveness, to keep the most traumatic of his feelings at bay... for all the power of the panic attack ripping through him... for all the sheer weight of the past bearing down on Billy's weakening shoulders...

It is the genuine concern in Steve's voice, warm and honest and clear as a bell, that tears everything within him down.

The noise that escapes Billy is hardly human. He doesn't recognize it, and he can't stop it or the deluge of tears that follow. Months worth, years worth of fear and grief and frustration tear out of him by force, and once they start they don't stop.

"Billy!" Steve knocks again, sounding frantic yet also still keeping his promise and not coming in without permission. "Billy!"

Billy sobs, face in his hands, fingers tugging roughly at unruly curls.

"Please," he chokes out. "Please..."

Please.

Please go away.

Please stay with me.

Please make this stop hurting.

Please let me feel something besides this.

Anything but this.

Please.

"Billy, I..." Steve breaks off, muttering something quietly to himself that sounds like a curse before continuing. "Just say something, okay? Just tell me you're alive, please."

The noise Billy makes in response is plenty garbled, but is apparently

coherent enough to satisfy Steve for the moment.

"I... is it a panic attack?"

The question doesn't really make sense for a long moment, but then Billy logs it and forces himself to get a grip on the crying for just long enough to murmur: "I'm okay. I'm okay...."

Steve hears him, somehow, and there's a brief pause before the brunette responds. Billy can almost picture the other boy's face processing this and reaching a decision.

"Okay," Steve says, voice strong and firm and clear, even through the closed door. "I'm going to talk for a bit now, and if you need me to stop, or you want me to get you something, could you yell or throw a shoe or something at the door? I won't come in if you don't want me to, I'll stay out here for now... but if I can't see you I need you to please tell me if you need me to stop, okay?"

There's a long pause, a terrible stretch of silence before Billy manages to croak out another "Okay".

"Okay," Steve echoes.

"Okay," he says again after a brief pause where he is clearly trying to collect his thoughts. "Look. I don't know, okay? I couldn't possibly know. Forget the part where I'm the world's biggest moron. Even if I wasn't, I could never really know what you went through. What you're still going through. I get that and I'm not going to say that stupid thing everyone says about how they understand, even when they don't know shit. But..."

Billy can hear Steve suck in a deep breath. There's a gentle thunk against the door as the boy leans against it and slides to the ground, getting comfortable.

"But. I... I have dreams," Steve continues, something distant and sad in his tone now. "I have nightmares. I couldn't sleep. That part I... I know. I understand that part.

"You don't... you didn't know our friend. Barb. She wasn't my friend, really. She was Nancy's friend. I didn't even really invite her over

that night, she just came when Nancy did. Girlfriends, you know? Making sure Nancy was okay. I just wanted to hang out with Nancy, and I wasn't really... I wasn't a great, nice guy to Barb and... and then we... me and Nancy had sex and Barb... those things... the monsters, they came and..."

Billy closes his eyes.

"She died in the pool. In my pool. Except, we never found a body. She died because we were... I was too busy with my own shit and with Nancy to realize she was still out there. Nancy never forgave me for that. Never forgave herself for that, either, and I didn't realize... I had nightmares about the Demogorgon after we fought it the first time but it wasn't until after Nancy broke up with me that I started... I started dreaming about Barb.

"Nancy was drunk that night at the Halloween party and she said we killed Barb and I didn't understand right away, but... she was right. She was right. We... we killed someone, and even if we didn't do it ourselves it was still our fault. Nobody in the world would blame us, really, but I don't think you can just... just decide not to take on guilt, even when stuff isn't really your fault. It's always there. And now... now I dream of Barb and the... the tunnels. Of Barb dragging me down into the tunnels, and..."

There's a sound on the other side of the door, a kind of wounded, choked sound, and Billy can't see Steve through the door but he recognizes the emotions unspoken and feels a deep kinship with the other boy, born of a tragic, familiar pain.

"It was bad. With Nancy, at the end, I was... I was trying to find something to hold on to and it... it was the wrong thing, I guess. And I haven't really dated since because... I mean, who wants to have sex with someone and then wake up to them screaming about a dead girl? I wake up and I go for my baseball bat before I even realize where I am, some nights. It's... I mean, I self-sabotage. That's what Robin calls it. She's pretty smart, she's probably right. I let Barb down, I let everyone down, and I'm afraid it'll happen again. I act out around people and I can't tell them the truth and I can't... trust... that anyone will stay with me... nobody stays, and..."

Billy can't hold it back anymore.

He lets out another brutal sob, and when Steve scrambles up against the door and asks again to be let in - please, Billy, please, can I come in? - Billy can't stop himself from answering with a garbled affirmative.

He barely has time to tug a sheet over his exposed bits before Steve is through the door. It hardly matters, however, because apparently Billy has decided that this would be an excellent time to completely fall apart, regardless.

He could hit himself for being so ridiculous and weak and vulnerable, but as it is all he can do is fall into Steve's arms.

Steve, for his part, only hesitates for a second. Once he sees Billy, naked and crying and alone, he makes the executive decision that hugging the boy is worth any punch he may receive in response.

"I've got you," he murmurs, scooping the other boy up as he wraps himself around him, tugging up blankets, settling them both on the bed. "I've got you, it's okay..."

"It's not me," Billy chokes out, still crying, still unable to stop now that he's started up again. "It's not mine..."

"What?" Steve tugs Billy close. "What isn't?"

"Any of it!" Billy doesn't exactly wail as he gives voice to his secret pain, his brutal grievances, but it's a close thing. "This isn't *mine*!"

He pulls away, tugs angrily at his skin, scratching at his arms, wiggling away when Steve tries to stop him.

"It's not *me*..."

He means his body. He feels like he's going to crawl out his skin, his skin that was marked and wrecked and used by a monster. He can't trust his muscles to hold any strength, his bones to hold him up, his unflinching lust for life to propel him forward.

The faith he had in his own identity is gone.

His whole self was stolen, claimed by something alien and evil. He was just a passenger, and he doesn't know how to get back in the drivers seat. He doesn't know how to remake himself into someone he recognizes.

Touching himself is like touching someone else. A rotten, ugly stranger.

"Billy, please! Please, *don't...*"

The gentle urgency of Steve's voice shocks him, makes him realize that he's still trying to scratch at his skin. He doesn't stop so much as he lets Steve stop him - the brunette wraps his hands around Billy's trembling fingers and tugs them to his own chest.

"You're okay," Steve murmurs, reaching down to tug the duvet up and wrap it around Billy's shoulders. "You're okay."

"I'm not me," Billy whispers. "This isn't me."

"It is. Billy... you're not possessed anymore. It's you, you're fine..."

Billy shakes his head.

"He's still in here. He touched everything and I can't... I can't..."

"It didn't get you, Billy," Steve insists. "It didn't win, Billy. It's gone, it's gone... sweetheart, you're okay. It's gone now, gone forever. Your body is yours and you are okay."

Billy sucks in a deep breath and a sob comes out, and it hurts.

But...

But, it's a clean hurt. It's different. Steve is looking at him with those wide doe eyes, and is holding Billy's hands to his chest to keep him from scratching, and is covering Billy's nakedness with blankets and his own body.

Billy realizes, belatedly and with a kind of sorrowful relief, that he is still, fully, and openly, crying.

He is *crying*.

He hasn't cried at all since he woke up in agony in the ambulance, hasn't cried since he squeezed out painful tears while still trapped in his possessed body. Tears were all that he could give while the Mind Flayer murdered and violated and threatened everything Billy ever was and ever cared for.

Tears where the only things that belonged to him and him alone while he was possessed. Even his memories weren't just his... but he had his tears, leaking out of that traitorous body. The only thing that could signal to the world his horror and his pain.

He cried when he was possessed and then he didn't cry anymore. Couldn't cry anymore.

Everything shut down. Dead, buried, gone.

Now he is *crying*. He is *feeling* - wave after wave after wave and...

Oh shit.

Steve is right. Billy can feel it now, here, in the tears, in the honesty of grief. In the promise of acceptance.

Steve is right.

It is his. He can feel it, deep down.

His. *His*.

"Steve," he chokes out. "Steve..."

"I'm here. You're okay."

"I'm not," Billy says, the crying already starting to taper off as he works to articulate his thoughts. "I'm not. I'm a fucking mess. I'm not okay..."

Steve huffs out a barely there chuckle and tugs Billy close so that Billy's head is tucked into Steve's shoulder. Another wave of sobs come out, safely buried in Steve's t-shirt.

"No," the brunette says. "I guess you're not. That's okay, though. It'd probably be more worrying if you were fine. Let's... let's not try to figure it all out right now, though, yeah? Why don't we just... lay down for a minute. Okay? You want to lay down?"

Billy can't think of anything he wants to do more, suddenly beyond exhausted, all thoughts of anything else vanishing just as quickly as they came. He goes obediently as Steve gently guides them both down so that their heads are resting on soft down pillows. He's still crying, but it's softer now, and growing less wrenching and violent by the minute.

Steve doesn't let go as he arranges blankets around them so they are both tucked in and warm underneath.

His gaze doesn't linger on the scars on Billy's chest, and Billy is very grateful for that.

"There we go," Steve murmurs, satisfied with his handiwork. "Lights on or off?"

Billy hesitates, swallowing the last lingering, hiccupping sob, and Steve, eyes warm with understanding, nods.

"I gotcha, hang on."

Steve rises, leans over to switch off all the lights but one small one which lets off a gentle, soft glow. In different circumstances Billy thinks one or the other of them might make a joke about the sexy ambiance, but for now neither comment.

Billy continues to sniffle like a child as Steve settles himself, but Steve doesn't pass judgment on that either. He simply climbs in next to Billy and tugs the blonde's hands back to his chest, tucking in close so they can see each other without having to make eye contact.

They remain like that, soaking in warmth and comfort in sweet silence, for what feels like ages. And yet, Billy thinks, he would happily stay here, in this moment. Forever, if he could.

"I don't sleep anymore," Billy says eventually, quietly, filled with the need to give Steve this. "Only during the day, and then only for short

naps. I have nightmares otherwise. I thought... I thought if I jerked off maybe I could sleep after, but...but I can't do that. I can't, um... make it work."

"Yeah," Steve says gently. "Sure."

"It might be the meds. Or... when you said it was safe here, I thought maybe it was my brain, like, short-circuiting out of fear... but... it's not that. If I don't feel safe here I'll never feel safe anywhere. So... that means it's... it's just how it is now. Like I'll never... be normal..."

Punishment, Billy doesn't say, but the word floats across his mind like a giant warning signal. And though he doesn't say it out loud Steve seems to know what he's thinking.

Justice, Billy thinks. I didn't die, but that doesn't mean I get to live. This punishment is one I earned by not being strong enough to fight.

"I know it doesn't fix anything," Steve says abruptly, interrupting his downward spiral. "I know it won't make one bit of difference in the middle of the night when the nightmares come. But, Billy...?"

Billy looks up at Harrington's deadly serious expression.

"Billy... it wasn't your fault. None of it."

Billy tries to duck his head but Steve isn't having it, he tucks his own chin down and forces Billy to meet his eyes.

"Some fucking powerful monster," Steve says, carefully enunciating each word, "held you down and took over your mind. It hurt you, it made you do all those things... but that monster is *not* you. It is not *any* part of you. It wasn't your fault."

The two boys lay there in silence for a moment before Billy finds his voice again.

"I think sometimes that it chose me because of what I am," he says. "Because I'm... I'm not strong. I'm not strong and maybe there is something... something rotten or dead in me. After my mom... she left us, and there are times when I don't feel... right. When nothing feels right, like it should. Or I feel so empty and I think... it has to be

something wrong inside of me. It has to be something broken. It's like the Mind Flayer knew where all my weakest parts are. And now I'm nothing but those... those leftover pieces. The worst of me. All the stuff the Mind Flayer used... it was already there. Like a cancer, waiting."

"Billy," Steve shakes his head. "Billy... I was there, remember? I saw you at Starcourt. I saw what you did, how hard you fought, when you finally got the Mind Flayer out of your head. You saved El. You pretty much saved everyone. That's you, the real you."

Billy, unconvinced, hunches slightly.

"And you know what?" Steve continues, voice rising slightly. "Maybe you are all those things. Maybe you are... are weak and wrong and violent and selfish and broken. Maybe you always have that worst version of yourself inside of you. But you know what? You're also brave and strong and protective and smart and funny and selfless. You're also the best version of yourself."

"Steve..." Billy whispers. "You don't..."

"I see it," Steve insists. "I saw it when you came into the video store. Fuck, Billy, you needed something to help you heal and you walked into the video store and asked for it. You know how gutsy that is? How brave? You know how many people would just... I don't know, let it fester inside without trying to fix it? That's the Billy I see. You're not perfect, but you don't have to be. You're brave and amazing. And you may have been taken and used by something ugly and horrible, but it still wasn't your fault."

Steve is worked up and breathing heavily by the end of his tirade. Billy stares at him, wide-eyed and thoughtful.

"You're," Billy swallows. "You're right... I don't know if it helps at all. It's still... I don't see it, really, but... thanks. Thank you."

The two boys sink back into comfortable silence, letting their heartbeats settle, letting their bodies sink into soft sheets.

It's Steve who speaks next, nearly a fully twenty minutes later,

releasing words gentle and hopeful, like a poem or a prayer.

"I can touch you, if you want," Steve whispers. "I mean... if you want."

It takes Billy a long moment to understand what Steve is saying. He studies the other boy in the dim light, considering.

He's so brave, Billy thinks. All those things he does that I used to think were foolishness... it's bravery.

"So you are, then? Gay?" he asks carefully. "I wasn't really sure if I was reading that right."

Steve hesitates and then shrugs.

"I like girls, obviously, but... yeah. I've never really thought about it before a little while ago, but... I'm trying to just live my life without labeling things so much. Maybe I jerked off to a couple of guys, uh, kind of recently. Patrick Swayze. Jon Bon Jovi. Um... Judd Nelson, once. And... and I like you. I could... I'd like to do that, with you. If you thought you might like to. You'd... you'd be my first, um, guy, but... I want... I want to try with you, if you'd be okay with me not really knowing... knowing what I'm doing."

Steve sucks in a breath and lets it out slowly, bolstering his courage.

"I... I wasn't just blowing smoke up your ass, before. I had fun tonight, talking, watching movies with you... before all the heavy shit. I didn't mind talking about the heavy shit, either... I felt comfortable. I like you, Billy. You're funny and smart and... and really hot. Like..." Steve gulps down the urge to wax rhapsodic about Billy's beauty and shakes his head slightly. "I don't want to mess up being friends with you if you don't want to... to do that with me, I understand either way, but... if you're interested I'd like to... erm. Date you?"

Steve can't help but make the last phrase a question, and he forces himself to clamp his mouth shut before he keeps yammering indefinitely. He's almost afraid to look at the other boy, but when he does force himself he's not disappointed by what he sees.

Billy is watching Steve with something like soft, fond bemusement. After a long moment he leans forward and plants a gentle kiss on the corner of the brunette's mouth. It is chaste and gentle and self-contained.

Steve knows better than to chase it, though he tastes the promise in it.

"Later, okay?" Billy says softly. He smiles a little, gentle and knowing, and Steve can see that it's not a rejection. Just a request for time, and that's fine. He can do that.

"I'm..." Billy sighs deeply. "I'm so tired, right now. So fucking tired, Steve."

"Yeah," Steve agrees. He feels it too, a strange sinking in his bones, but not unpleasant.

Not at all like those nights before when he drove himself to near-madness with insomnia.

There is something clean about this kind of weariness.

"Stay, though," Billy whispers. "Please? Stay with me tonight?"

Steve grins broadly, almost gleeful at the thought before he remembers why that might be a bad idea.

"Uh," he hedges, mouth twisting slightly in a frown. "I might... I might wake you up."

"It's okay."

"Are you sure? It's not... it's not pretty, when I do that. I might yell, or lash out..."

"It's okay," Billy murmurs, and Steve would think that the other boy may already be drifting off to sleep if it wasn't for the steady, sure thread of conviction in his voice. "It'll be okay."

"...Oh...okay."

Steve shifts just enough to kick off his shoes before returning to his snuggling position with Billy.

"Maybe..." he says thoughtfully. "Maybe this weekend we can go see *The Lost Boys* at the Hawk? Robin saw it, she said it was really good."

Billy lets out a wet chuckle and shrugs.

"Sure," he murmurs. "I like Jason Patric." There is a brief hesitation, and then, "I always liked brunettes with good jawlines and pretty hair."

Steve swallows.

"Pssh," he croaks out, burying his nerves under the gentlest, fluttering feeling of hope. "Kiefer Sutherland is way better. Gotta love blonde, mullet-wearing assholes with cool cars and leather jackets."

Billy doesn't say anything in response to that for a long time. It is so long that Steve thinks he might have fallen asleep in the darkness.

Then, a small sigh breaks the stillness.

"I don't..." Billy murmurs, voice heavy with sadness. "I don't have the jacket anymore. I was wearing it, um... when the Mind Flayer..."

Steve sucks in a harsh breath and holds it, waits silently for the other boy to continue.

"I had my chance to go as Schwarzenegger for Halloween," the blonde says, finally. "Won't get that again."

"Because of the jacket?"

"Because of the scars, Steve."

Silence falls and for a long moment neither Steve nor Billy move. Then, Steve raises one hand and gently places it against Billy's chest. He covers up horrific scars, testaments to pain and survival, with the span of his long fingers and soft palm.

All the old weight, the horror and the pain, the inescapable

knowledge that he has *changed* threatens to crash down on Billy's head again.

But, low and behold, the chaos doesn't come.

Instead, something inside Billy stills, anchored in place by a warm point pressing against his skin, hovering over his heart, rising and falling with his breaths. Long, lovely fingers touch the risen lines of his scars, star-shaped and strange as they are.

Steve doesn't speak, and he doesn't have to. He just has to be here, and understand.

That's enough.

After another beat Billy lifts his own hand up and covers Steve's with it.

"Sleep now," Steve murmurs.

And, for the first time in months, Billy does.

Notes for the Chapter:

Guys, this is a double betrayal, I'm so sorry! Not only did this chapter take twice as long as I expected to write, but also Billy was once again unable to successfully choke the chicken by the end!! Betrayal and despair!!

Yeah, this one just got away from me - I got tangled up in the angst and before I knew it the chapter was already too long. However, I swear by the smut gods that there is another chapter forthcoming and that it will be nothing but gratuitous filth. Cross my heart!

As every, you guys are epically awesome angels for putting up with me! Kudos and comments as always

are much loved and greatly appreciated. Be safe and healthy! <3

4. It didn't stop you coming through

Notes for the Chapter:

There is nothing in this but smut, at long last!

Some hours later Billy wakes up. It's night, still - the sky outside the window is velvety dark, punctuated by the glowing twinkle of stars.

Billy doesn't jerk awake, like he usually does when he's leaving a nightmare, and that's a change for sure. In fact, there were no dreams, good or bad, for him to come out of. Only sleep, and he comes out of that gently. He simply opens his eyes and is there, alive, present.

He needs to piss.

In the dim light of the single lamp, still glowing like a promise in the otherwise darkened room, Billy sees Steve's eyes drift lazily open, fix that warm, sleepy gaze on his face.

Billy murmurs something, tells the other boy that everything is alright... go back to sleep.

Steve hears him, but his eyes don't close. They simply watch with gentle interest as Billy pushes up and drags his naked form out of the bed. In passing, Billy thinks he should reach for his towel, a sheet, a pair of bottoms, something... but he doesn't. He leaves himself bare even though only a shadow of the confidence that used to define him still remains.

Though maybe that confidence is just a little more solid now. There's a little self-assurance where there wasn't any before.

After all, Steve has still asked him out, hadn't he?

Billy may not be what he was, but... Steve is still looking at him, gaze hooded and dark.

He doesn't preen, but he does stretch slightly, semi-conscious of the challenge he is quietly throwing down, before walking to the

bathroom as he is.

He can't humiliate himself in front of Harrington more than he already has, and even after that spectacle he made of himself earlier Steve is still here. If he hasn't run for the hills yet he probably isn't going to now just because he's seeing Billy at an angle he's already enjoyed in the school showers.

There's a bit of a dare in there, too, in Billy's choice. Like playing chicken.

Maybe Steve wants him, and maybe Steve doesn't, and maybe Steve doesn't know one way or another yet. Maybe Steve won't be able to see past all the changes in Billy's body, all the scars. Maybe he'll look now and decide it's not worth it.

Either way, then, Billy will know.

I'm here. This is me. I dare you to accept or reject this. Pushing, pushing like I do on the court, in the showers, at school, when we're fighting. Something in me always wants to see what you are going to do.

Go on, King Steve.

Push the moment to its crisis.

Billy goes to the ensuite, relieves himself, washes his hands and rinses his mouth out. He feels strangely comfortable, calm. Strangely free from the anxieties that dominated before. He feels like he's survived the worst, somehow, even though he still hasn't managed to do what he came to Harrington's house to do. But maybe even that doesn't matter so much, as long as somewhere in there he gets to rest.

It's amazing what a little undisturbed sleep can do.

He's ready to go back to bed, to try to find some more of that elusive beast that is unconsciousness, nestled in safe and warm next to Steve... Steve who will keep the monsters away. He opens the door, flicking off the light switch as he goes, and heads back into the bedroom.

"Wait."

Billy stops, slightly startled. Pulled from his ruminations, he glances up at Steve, who is still watching him from his place on the bed with those fathomless dark eyes.

After a brief moment, Steve pushes the duvet off of himself. He's still in his t-shirt and jeans, having never gotten a chance to change into something more comfortable before Billy tugged him into bed. He shifts against the sheets, stretching out, gaze still fixed on Billy.

He reaches down and, with one fluid, slow movement, tugs his shirt off.

And, again, it's nothing Billy hasn't seen before in different circumstances. He still remembers, with perhaps unwarranted vividness, interactions in the showers where Steve Harrington had been on full display like some kind of wet (haha) dream.

However, now, in the dim light, with all of night thick and velvet outside, there is a promise in the gesture that's unmistakable. There is potential in the expanse of skin, the patterns of the moles speckling that pale chest, lean and well-muscled and beautiful.

Here, and bare, and all for Billy. For *his* eyes.

Slowly, deliberately, without saying a word, Steve undoes the top button of his pants, then the zipper. He pushes his jeans down and off his body. Kicking them off, he takes another moment afterwards to lean back, stretch and settle like a cat getting comfortable.

His eyes stay on Billy - assessing, but also like he can't look away. Like Billy is doing his own mirror strip-tease instead of just standing seven feet away, framed in the doorway of the bathroom, staring wide-eyed and open-mouthed at Steve's performance.

There's only a pair of dark blue boxers left on Steve now.

Billy's dick, completely unprompted, twitches.

Billy almost wants to look down, to glare in disbelief, to confirm that what he thinks he's feeling down there is really happening.

He doesn't though. Anyway, the way Steve's eyes widen slightly, the

way his mouth quirks up, is enough of a confirmation.

Even if it wasn't, Billy is completely caught in the other boy's orbit. He doesn't want to look away, doesn't want to miss a second of this thing unfolding in front of him.

The sight of Steve stretched out, long and lovely, on warm clean sheets, his for the asking - it's better than any porno or peep show. No illicit tape he could get from Hawkins Family Video could possibly compare.

Steve hooks long, clever fingers carefully under the band of his boxers.

Without blinking, he pulls them down, down, down and off, and tosses them to the side before leaning back again, belly-up, vulnerable, and fully nude.

Steve is long, thick, uncut. He is already half-hard, and Billy has to wonder what fantasies Steve concocted in the few minutes he was in the bathroom that got him there. His member bobs slightly, filling even as Billy watches.

There is a pause as Steve studies Billy, trying to read something in his face - searching for approval or disapproval.

Billy's mouth is dry, and he couldn't speak even if he wanted to. However, the brunette seems to see enough to push him onward, bolster his courage.

He takes a deep breath as if to steady himself, raises one hand, and then licks his palm.

The act is slow and filthy as he continues with deliberate intent, spitting, licking, wetting his hand thoroughly for what Billy now knows will come. And yet, even as Steve does this, his eyes are wide, his face shining up at Billy with a kind of uncertainty. Innocence.

It strikes Billy then that Steve probably has no idea what the two of them might get up to together. For all of Steve's crushes on various actors - and on Billy himself, apparently - Steve has been nothing but sweetly chaste with him so far, and there's little chance Steve would

know anything about the mechanics of gay sex. How would he possibly know?

No, Steve has no idea what might happen, and yet...

He's trusting Billy with this, anyway.

That, as much as anything, gets Billy fully on board with this turn of events.

When Steve finally grasps himself, wraps a spit-slicked hand around his rapidly-plumping length, Billy can't help but mirror him. Somehow, without him realizing, he has gone from sleepy and calm to achingly aroused in about a minute.

Billy is hard and ready and, when his hand reaches down to fondle his erect cock, it is as natural as breathing for him. He isn't frightened or sad or anything but eager and wanting.

It's almost stupidly effortless, in the end.

Or... maybe he just needed the right kind of motivation.

The right kind of *stimulation*.

"Lotion," Steve murmurs, working his hand up and down with agonizing slowness that Billy mimics unconsciously. "There's lotion in the..."

"I have..." Billy fumbles, unwilling to look away from Steve, reaching down and grabbing the bottle he brought out of his bag. He is going to hand it to Steve, thinks Steve wants it for himself, but the other boy shakes his head.

"For you, baby," Steve says, voice rough with eager arousal. "Use it for you..."

Billy hears the unspoken words as he ducks his head and takes a generous dollop of the lotion for himself.

I don't want you to hurt, baby. I want it to feel good. Don't hurt yourself.

Slick yourself up for me.

"Good," Steve murmurs, watching him, licking his lips.

The sight of that tongue flicking out between those lovely lips sends a shudder through Billy's body. He lets out a breathy thing like a moan and touches himself again, easing the ache through stimulation. He pumps his slicked-up hand up and down, and it feels good, so good, and he's torn between moaning with pleasure and sighing with relief.

"Here," Steve puts one hand on Billy's side of the bed, pats it gently, the other still moving over his cock at a steady pace. His voice is breathy but the sentiment is clear. "Kneel. Here, over me."

It's like a statement, an order, but the plea in Steve's voice is impossible to ignore. Both sides of that tone - the demand and the begging - send a thrill through Billy. He hurries to obey, kneeling next to Steve on the bed, hovering over him as they both fondle themselves.

"Fuck," Steve whispers, touching himself with more speed and urgency. His hips are rocking slightly, unconscious and instinctual. "Fuck, yeah, I..."

Steve will be loud, Billy thinks suddenly, the idea weighty and rich with potential. If...when we touch each other... when that happens, Steve will be loud. He will babble and chatter and say my name like a prayer...

"You like this," is what he says out loud. It's not a question, but there is incredulity and awe in his tone. "You like being under me, pretty boy?"

Steve lets out a breathy little whine and bites his lip, and Billy nearly chokes at the sight.

"Yeah," Steve breathes. "I like it. Beautiful. You're like a... you're so..."

"I wanna see you," Billy blurts out. He shifts, still not touching Steve but eager to get closer. "I wanna see you... spread your legs. Please, Steve..."

Steve swallows, choking on a nervous hiccup, and obeys slowly. He

spreads his legs wide and Billy scrambles over, plants himself between them. Billy is still moving his fist up and down, is still impossibly, maddeningly hard and shaky, but he is also focused now on Steve, on seeing that uncharted territory with fresh, possessive eyes.

He gently plants his free hand on Steve leg and pushes slightly, urges him to bend his knee. "Spread your legs, baby. Up. Show me. You've got the most gorgeous ass, sweetheart... let me... let me see..."

Knees bent and legs spread, Steve is moaning loudly now, blushing terribly, the flush of pleasure and gentle humiliation coloring his cheeks, his neck, down to his collar bones.

Billy watches the sweet blush creep across pale skin, utterly charmed, and then his eyes drift down and he is further entranced by the sight of the sweet patch of curly brown hair, Steve's long, pale fingers clenched around his violently red cock, heavy balls tightening below. His gaze tracks down, down to that perfect ass and, nestled between pale cheeks and winking up at him, the tightly furled little hole.

"I'll suck your cock, Steve," Billy moans, almost whines, the words an overflow of desperate want. "When you want, I'll suck your cock, swallow you down, deepthroat you..."

Steve lets out a stuttered gasp, eyes wide and mouth dropping open in shocked arousal, hand still furiously massaging his red and leaking member.

"I'll fuck you," Billy promises, half-wild with the future opening up in front of him, riding the wave of his own building pleasure. "I'll finger your sweet little asshole open, lick you open. I'll stick my tongue in, baby, until you're all loose and wet and begging me. You can ride me. It feels so good, Steve, you don't even know... but I'll show you. I'll show you everything, I'll show you how it feels... so fucking full and... uhhh, stretched.... and when I hit your sweet spot... yeah. Yeah, I'll do it all with you. You can fuck me, too. I'll be so hot and tight on your cock... I'll make you see stars, sweetheart. I'll fuck you so good..."

Steve's hand is moving frantically over his cock now, and he's

writhing beneath Billy, and even though Billy's gentle fingers on Steve's knee are the only point of physical contact between them, Billy has never been harder or more aroused in his life.

He is panting and needy, his fist tight and pumping his cock, precum dribbling out when Steve lets out a choked, desperate moan.

"Please..."

"You're perfect, fucking perfect, Steve," Billy murmurs. "I'll show you. I promise. My tongue, my fingers... my cock. My ass. Yours. Fucking yours."

"Billy, you're so..."

"Again," Billy whispers, interrupting. He leans further over Steve, still not touching but nevertheless dominating and protecting, hungry for him. Wild at the sight of Steve Harrington beneath him, panting, on display, face twisted up with bliss.

He feels like himself, like the old Billy, purring filthy love-songs dangerously close to someone's ear... and he also feels like someone complete new, because he is new, brand new, and also because he is doing this with Steve.

And now he wants...

"My name. Again. Steve... say it again..."

"Billy," Steve moans. "Billy, *Billy*..."

Steve cums, chanting Billy's name... and Billy was right, he does say it like a prayer, like desperation and longing and freedom and desire all resonating the broken repetition of two syllables. The brunette's fingers clench, and then he arches up, eyes squeezing shut, ejaculate spurting out onto his belly. The rhythmic cadence of Billy's name trails off in to a strangled cry, completely ragged and unashamed, as Steve moans through his release, sucking in air.

It's the most goddamn beautiful thing Billy's ever seen.

Billy watches hungrily, focus on Steve's thick, pulsing cock, on the

pearly cum splattering across his heaving chest.

He's looking almost too closely - looking to consume rather than interpret - and as such he's somewhat unprepared when Steve half-lurches up on his elbows, a hand reaching up to cup Billy's cheek.

He jumps slightly when he feels Steve tenderly cradle his face, licks his lips unconsciously. He sucks in a deep breath and his eyes meet Steve's and just like that he sees exactly what Steve is asking for.

There is only the briefest hesitation, the shared glance that confirms that yes, they both want this, please, please...

Steve kisses him. It's filthy but also, somehow, sweetly tender. It starts as a question and then, when Billy answers, heart pounding with his own desire, it deepens and seeks and finds. Steve pulls him down, down, down into the abyss, into the kiss, into the dark... soft and gentle and nothing like the last time Billy was dragged down somewhere by forces outside of his control.

Billy surrenders to it, feels some wall inside come crumbling down, some tense piano wire snap.

He feels the drag of teeth against his lips and long, clever fingers tentatively touching his own thick ones where they are still wrapped tightly around his cock, and just like that he is cumming, hard and sudden and half-wildly.

He doesn't quite break the kiss - he cries out against Steve's lush mouth, the noise vibrating before being swallowed up between the two of them. He is riding the wave, it crests, he reaches that impossible point, and he is *there*. Finally, finally, he is there.

And then he is painting Steve's chest with his spend, coating him, marking him as his, as *his*...

Steve lets out a violent choked moan and Billy thinks that, if the brunette could have cum a second time, he would have then.

Billy lets it all out. He cums. He cries out, trembling, explosive pleasure vibrating through his whole body.

He breathes for what feels like the first time in so, so long, and then he collapses into Steve's waiting arms, their shared mess between them.

They don't speak, after.

In silent, mutual agreement, once they both stop shaking and can inhale again with relative calm, they roll over so they are both on their sides, so they can see each other still without one crushing the other.

Steve reaches over and grabs some tissues from a box by the bed, wiping himself off. He hands Billy a couple, too, before collapsing back on the sheets like he just ran a marathon. Billy can sympathize.

They don't talk, but it's okay.

Steve rolls back on his side, and one of his hands reaches over and wraps itself around Billy's fingers.

An anchor point. A lifeline.

And before he even realizes what is happening, Billy is falling asleep again.

Notes for the Chapter:

Success!! Filthy, smutty success!!! Bwahahahaha!!!

<3